

IRAQ'S MUQTADA AL-SADR: SPOILER OR STABILISER?

Middle East Report N°55 – 11 July 2006

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IRAQ'S MUQTADA AL-SADR: SPOILER OR STABILISER?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With stepped-up U.S.-led raids against Muqtada al-Sadr's militia, *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, and media allegations of the militia's responsibility for widespread and particularly horrendous sectarian killings in Baghdad on 9 July, the Shiite leader and his movement have become more central than ever. The war in Iraq radically reshuffled the country's political deck, bringing to the fore new actors and social forces, none more surprising and enigmatic, and few as critical to Iraq's stability, as Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement he embodies. Largely unknown prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime and bereft of resources Shiites typically must possess to assert their authority, Muqtada al-Sadr at first was dismissed as a marginal rabble-rouser, excluded from the political process and, after he flexed his muscles, decreed wanted "dead or alive" by the U.S.-led coalition. Learning the hard way, the U.S. and its allies have had to recognise the reality of the Sadrists' strength.

Today, the Sadrists play a central part in government and parliament. The young imam enjoys a cult-like following among Shiite masses. How his forces act will be vital to the country's future. The Sadrist movement has deep roots, and its demands reflect many justified grievances. The key is to ensure that Muqtada helps bring the Sadrists and their social base fully into the political process. For that, he will have to be treated as a legitimate, representative actor and act as one.

The most puzzling aspect of Muqtada's ascent is that he possesses none of the more obvious criteria of political success and little that can account for the existence and resilience of his social base. Although coming from a prominent family, he is neither particularly charismatic nor a particularly adept speaker. He does not enjoy the backing of a party apparatus. He has few religious credentials. By most accounts, even his material assets are scanty: by and large, he is excluded from the financial networks controlled by the Shiite clerical class and is not truly aligned with any foreign sponsor, receiving at best limited material support from Iran. Likewise, the Sadrists are not a typical political movement. They have neither a coherent nor consistent agenda, and neither experienced nor identifiable leaders and advisers. Especially during the occupation's first two years, the

young imams that led the movement were inexperienced, displaying far more zeal than political wisdom.

For all these reasons, the Sadrists early on were dismissed as an irrelevant aberration with little purchase on the nation's future. The coalition and its Iraqi partners considered Muqtada's behaviour inconsistent, his judgment erratic, his discourse radical and his movement chaotic. Underestimating him proved costly; between April and August 2004, it led to deadly confrontation between his followers and coalition forces.

The origins of this miscalculation are straightforward. Heavily relying on former exiles, the U.S. built a political process from which it was easy to exclude Muqtada. It was not so easy to exclude him from his social base. Muqtada enjoyed significant popular backing and a power base in the Shiite slums of Baghdad, the city of Kufa, and the governorate of Maysan. His followers, for the most part impoverished Shiites, are remarkably determined and loyal. Muqtada secured strong legitimacy in the eyes of his constituency, far stronger in fact than that of Shiite personalities coopted by the coalition. He has become the authentic spokesman of a significant portion of traditionally disenfranchised Iraqis who, far from benefiting from the former regime's ouster, remained marginalised from the emerging political order.

His outlook also proved appealing, as he was at the cross section of disparate, seemingly contradictory stances. He consistently denounced the occupation and displayed sympathy for the armed opposition while simultaneously participating in the political process the U.S. set up and which the armed groups combat. His movement is profoundly Shiite, but his nationalistic discourse, resistance to the occupation, hostility toward other Shiite actors (the clerical establishment in Najaf and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)) and opposition to federalism have earned him respect from some Sunni Arabs. His rejection of an autonomous southern, predominantly Shiite, state and his reluctance to compromise with the Kurds on the status of Kirkuk, together with the strength of his armed militia, *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, have put him at the centre of issues critical to the future of the political process: negotiations over the constitution,

agreement over the status of Kurdistan, the eventual dismantling and disarming of militias and the timing of coalition forces' withdrawal. Moreover, Muqtada has begun to acquire regional standing, having displayed surprising diplomatic skill during an early 2006 tour of neighbouring countries.

Seen by many as a spoiler, his political positioning and legitimacy in the eyes of a restless, disenfranchised population have made Muqtada a key to Iraq's stability, and he must be treated as such. But Muqtada must do more to exercise responsible leadership himself. As sectarian tensions have grown, so too has his movement's involvement in the dirty war that pits Sunnis against Shiites. Muqtada has maintained his calls for national unity, even in the wake of particularly vicious attacks against Shiite civilians, yet the February 2006 attack against a Shiite shrine in Samarra appears to have been a turning point. Since then, the violence has reached alarming proportions as Sadrist have indiscriminately attacked presumed Baathists and Wahhabis. Controlling his forces and putting an end to their killings is Muqtada's principal challenge. Should he fail to meet it, he will be partly responsible for two things he ardently claims he wishes to avoid: the country's fragmentation and an Islamic civil war.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist Movement:

1. Take vigorous steps to end attacks by *Jaysh al-Mahdi* against Sunni Arabs by:
 - (a) clearly and unambiguously condemning all sectarian-based killings, whether committed by Sunnis or Shiites;
 - (b) banning reprisal killings against former regime elements; and
 - (c) strengthening control over *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, including by taking strong disciplinary action in the event of such sectarian-based or politically-motivated killings.
2. Promote initiatives along the lines of the Mahdi institute aimed at increasing discipline among Sadrist militants, enforcing their respect for the rules of war and better defining their role and mission.

To Najaf-based Clerics:

3. Facilitate Sadr's reestablishment in Najaf's Holy City by:

- (a) authorising the reopening of a Sadrist headquarters near Imam Ali's shrine;
- (b) encouraging Sadrists to take classes offered by the *Hawza*; and
- (c) gradually integrating *Jaysh al-Mahdi* members into the city's SCIRI-dominated security forces.

To the Iraqi Government:

4. Rapidly reform the de-Baathification program to offer credible judicial recourse against individuals accused of committing crimes under the former regime.
5. Make it clear that demobilisation of all militias remains the goal but adopt a gradualist approach toward *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, by:
 - (a) focusing for now on circumscribing its functional and geographic area of operations to protecting civilians and engaging in social activities in Sadrist strongholds, while taking strong action against any political assassinations, sectarian-based attacks or checkpoints outside Sadrist zones; and
 - (b) postponing any attempt at coercive disarmament until national security forces are in a position to ensure safety in Sadrist strongholds.

To the U.S. Government:

6. Support steps taken by the Iraqi government toward the Sadrists consistent with recommendations 4 and 5 above.
7. Act vigorously to end all violations by U.S. forces of the Geneva Conventions as a prerequisite to encouraging respect for the rules of war among Iraqi security forces and all paramilitary organisations.

Amman/Brussels, 11 July 2006

IRAQ'S MUQTADA AL-SADR: SPOILER OR STABILISER?

I. MUQTADA'S LINEAGE

In the immediate aftermath of Saddam Hussein's ouster, Muqtada al-Sadr was known chiefly for his disruptive behaviour. He stirred up his mob-like following against the traditional Shiite leadership, former regime elements, politicians returning from exile, and occupation forces, leading to the deadly 2004 showdown with U.S. troops. Two years later, the young imam has grown into a radically different role. He enjoys quasi-veto power over key political appointments, and his movement won 32 of 275 parliamentary seats in the December 2005 elections. In a political environment largely shaped by communal loyalties and clientelist relationships, the Sadrist phenomenon stands out. Reflecting an authentic social movement, it expresses in political terms the frustrations, aspirations and demands of a sizeable portion of the population that has no other genuine representative.

According to his official biography, Muqtada al-Sadr was born in 1974 and traces his lineage to eminent Shiite religious figures.¹ Descendants of the Prophet, the Sadr form one of those large, transnational and learned families that, from one generation to another, pass on the requisite attributes of power and legitimacy in the Shiite world: prestigious ancestry, knowledge and accumulated resources.²

More specifically, Muqtada largely owes his position to two crucial figures of Iraq's contemporary history, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, one of his father's distant cousins, and his father, Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. In their own, quite different ways, both shaped the thinking and actions of opposition to earlier Baghdad-based regimes and of the *Hawza*'s dominant Shiite establishment,³ and both staked out

courageous political and intellectual positions for which they paid with their lives.

At bottom, their actions reflected dissatisfaction with the traditional role of religious scholars (*al-fuqaha*, sing. *al-faqih*). According to the so-called quietist school of thought (*al-madrasa al-taqlidiya*, the "traditional school") – most notably embodied today by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani – the *faqih* must convey the immutable message of holy writings and shun active political involvement.⁴ This intellectual predisposition, combined with the ever-expanding influence of the secular state throughout the twentieth century, led Najaf's *Hawza* to significantly curtail its activities. Increasingly inward-looking and preoccupied with abstruse jurisprudential matters, the *Hawza* and its leadership gradually detached themselves from daily popular concerns. In challenging this evolution, Muhammad Sadiq and Muhammad Baqir reflected broader historical tensions among Shiite scholars over whether to focus on individual mores or on politics.⁵

Muqtada's rise would have been unthinkable without his two forebears' efforts to subvert the quietist tradition.⁶

institution, ardently protective of its autonomy and financial independence and a non-state actor that transcends national boundaries by attracting Shiism's religious elite". Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°8, *Iraq's Shiites Under Occupation*, 9 September 2003, pp. 7, 9.

⁴ This characterisation is overly simplistic; so-called quietists occasionally intervene in political affairs. Ibid, pp. 9-10.

⁵ For a thorough analysis of the Sadrist phenomenon in the context of this dispute, see Hamid Yasin, "Les Processus du Courant Sadrisme de Père en Fils", unpublished thesis submitted to the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, 2005.

⁶ A Najaf taxi driver and former *Hawza* student reflected the extent to which the more conservative Shiite leadership views the Sadrist current as subversive. Drawing a link between Muhammad Sadiq's revolutionary changes and the unruliness of Muqtada's followers, he explained: "The situation in Najaf is tense because of the behaviour of these kids [the Sadrists]. In fact, the problem goes back to Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. He is the one who transgressed the *Hawza*'s traditions. When I was a student in Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim's *Hawza*, we were forbidden from sitting in a café or restaurant, or even from wearing a watch. At the time, there were rules, and we had to respect them. The other day, they tore pictures of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani on a street in Najaf. Such chaos would not have appeared without Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. We are shocked

¹ www.muqtada.com.

² There are many such families in the Shiite world, and their reach typically transcends national boundaries. For example, Ayatollah Musa al-Sadr, one of Muqtada's relatives, led Lebanon's impoverished Shiites.

³ *Hawza* 'ilmiyya means, literally, a territory of learning. "Najaf is where, in the eleventh century, the first genuine school or theological centre of Shiism was established. The *Hawza* consists of doctors of religion, tutors and students established at various religious schools and institutions....The *Hawza* is a unique

His words and deeds only make sense when seen against the backdrop of his predecessors:

The ideology of the Sadrist current goes back to Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the “first martyr” [*al shahid al-awwal*]. The first martyr differed from other *Hawza* notables in that he did not merely deal with issues of mores [*al-'ibadat*], such as how women must clean themselves and pray after their period or after giving birth.⁷ He did not waste his time reiterating *fatwas* about daily life, choosing instead to think daring thoughts. Besides, he emerged at a time when Shiites truly needed him. The second Sadr [Muhammad Sadiq] carried on the work of the first, for he too fulfilled this need. Muqtada al-Sadr is trying to preserve this legacy.⁸

A. MUHAMMAD BAQIR AL-SADR: THE REVOLUTIONARY THINKER AND “FIRST MARTYR”

Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr appeared predestined to becoming a traditional *Hawza* leader. His studies in Najaf earned him the title of ayatollah, and his academic standing made him Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim's rival and a potential successor to Ayatollah Abulqasim al-Khoei, the most respected ayatollah at the time, and head of the *Hawza* from 1971 till his death in 1992. A prolific and gifted writer, he could legitimately have aspired to eventual leadership of the *Hawza*, rising according to the rules of the clerical establishment.⁹ Instead, Muhammad Baqir

by this lack of respect toward the *Hawza*. All of this is new; we did not see this beforehand”. Crisis Group interview, Najaf, January 2006.

⁷ Sadrists often invoke this example, which stands as a metaphor for a broader critique of quietists, accused of seeking refuge in meaningless and obscure matters. “Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr represents a revolutionary current that was inspired by Ayatollah Khomeini. Muhammad Sadiq only echoed the charge levied by Khomeini against other religious dignitaries: ‘you busy yourselves with Islamic laws concerning menstruation and giving birth; I am leading a revolution’”. Crisis Group interview, a former follower of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, Baghdad, December 2005. “Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr sought to win over the masses. He showed people that the *Hawza* was not interested in the oppressed and dealt only with issues such as religious laws concerning a woman's period. As a general matter, the *Hawza* cared only about matters of daily life that, in fact, had no impact on how Iraqis really lived”. Crisis Group interview, former follower of Sadiq al-Sadr, hostile to Muqtada, Baghdad, December 2006.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, a representative of Muqtada al-Sadr, Najaf, January 2006.

⁹ In theory, clerics rise through a system of consensual cooptation, with students gradually advancing through the ranks with the aim of becoming a *marja*, a senior *Hawza* scholar and source

elaborated radically new ideas, shattering the strict division between the clerical institution and politics. Notably, he developed the concept of *wilayat al-faqih*,¹⁰ or government of the jurisprudent, which subjects the government to both the religious scholar's supreme authority and Islamic law (*shari'a*). He took up the challenge posed by the emergence of mass-based political parties, including the Communist Party and the Baath, replicating their mode of action, through the establishment of a Shiite Islamist party, al-Da'wa.¹¹

Seeking to stem the rise of secular parties, this clandestine organisation followed Baqir's teachings, advocating implementation of Islamic law and establishment of the rule of God on earth. By forming a political organisation with a strict hierarchy and governing charter, Baqir and his supporters fundamentally challenged the centrality of the *Hawza*, which was premised around the notion that new religious scholars (*marja'iyat*) would periodically arise and then disappear with their leader's demise.

The quietist clerical trend was not alone in feeling threatened by Baqir's movement and the emergence of a politicised ayatollah; so too did the secular regime.¹² Muhammad Baqir helped engineer a new form of political representation for Shiites who felt excluded from existing channels of representation. Baqir's

of emulation (*taqlid*). *Hawza* students choose which *marja* they wish to follow. “The more followers a cleric has and the more money he receives, the more elevated his position....Promotion results from an *ijaza* (certificate), granted by a higher authority or, alternatively, through recognition of an individual by a majority of clerics of lower rank. The process is not akin to a Vatican-like election; rather, it is a lengthy selection that uses organised disorder to produce recognised leaders....Most often, there is no consensus (on the selection of *marja*), and there are several *marja*”. Crisis Group Briefing, *Iraq's Shiites*, op. cit., p. 9. *Marjas* develop jurisprudential pronouncements that their followers must adhere to and use to interpret religious texts. The *Marja'ia* refers to both the *Marja*'s conception of his own role and the institutions (schools, representatives, etc.) upon which he relies to fulfil his duties. See Linda Walbridge (ed.), *The Most Learned of the Shi'a. The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid* (Oxford, 2001).

¹⁰ *Velayat-e faqih* in Persian, as the concept is known in Iran.

¹¹ According to al-Da'wa writings, Muhammad Baqir founded the party, although there is evidence it was more of a collective affair. See Faleh Abdul-Jabar (ed.), *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues. State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq* (London, 2002).

¹² Although it may appear odd to mention the quietists and the former regime in the same breath, Sadrists have made the comparison, as in 'Adil Ra'uf's renowned book, *Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Bayn Dikturiyatayn* [Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr between Two Dictatorships]. The two dictatorships in the title refer to the regime and the *Hawza*.

intransigence toward the regime,¹³ his popularity among Shiites, together with the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran magnified regime fears. In response, it killed hundreds of Baqir's followers and, in April 1980, Baqir himself. The quietist leadership in Najaf barely reacted to either his execution or the bloody suppression of his partisans – a passivity and silence that, to this day, Sadrist bitterly recall.

B. MUHAMMAD SADIQ AL-SADR: THE PLEBEIAN ACTIVIST AND “SECOND MARTYR”

Around that time, Baqir's cousin and pupil, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, was placed under house arrest. Born in 1943, Sadiq al-Sadr had until then published very little and was largely unknown. The Najaf clerical leadership reportedly snubbed him during his virtual detention, leaving him dejected and deeply resentful.¹⁴ In 1992, at the death of Ayatollah Abulqasim al-Khoei – then the *Hawza*'s dominant figure – Muhammad Sadiq was almost completely forgotten.

Paradoxically, he owed his re-emergence to the regime. By 1993, Iraqi authorities believed he could become an accommodating *Hawza* leader, and therefore supported his claim to become grand ayatollah;¹⁵ rumours even surfaced that they had signed a formal agreement with him.¹⁶ Unlike his colleagues, he was given tangible regime support. As a result, he took control of *Hawza*-related

schools, extended his network of representatives and social work, inaugurated an Islamic court in Najaf and re-opened libraries that had been destroyed during the 1991 repression campaign.¹⁷ His sons and a number of his students were exempted from military service, and in 1996 he was authorised to launch his own publication, *Huda* – a striking gesture in a country whose press was tightly controlled.¹⁸

Exploiting his newfound freedom, Sadiq al-Sadr launched an intensive anti-quietist campaign. He accused the clerical leadership of deserting the people and ensuring that numerous young Shiites had little or no knowledge of the *Hawza*, the *Marja'iya* or basic religious principles.¹⁹ He harshly criticised it for remaining silent after his cousin's execution, blaming it for having established a “*Hawza sakita*” – a *Hawza* made passive and mute by fear of retribution.²⁰ Alleging that their silence was directly responsible for Shiite suffering, Sadiq al-Sadr called for a radical redefinition of the *marja*'s role and of the nature of the *Hawza*, which, he argued should be a “*Hawza natiqa*” – vocal and militant. Rather than being a learned scholar in an ivory tower, he ought actively to defend the cause of the oppressed and get directly involved in social and political matters.²¹ By 1997, Sadiq al-Sadr claimed

¹³ Rejecting the regime's injunction that he submit to the Baath's authority, Baqir reportedly said: “If my little finger were Baathist, I would have cut it off” – a phrase that has since become a symbol of resistance among Iraqi Shiites.

¹⁴ In a 1997 audio recording known as the “interview of al-Hannana” (the Najaf neighbourhood where he lived), Muhammad Sadiq provided his version of these events, his path, objectives, and relations with other ayatollahs. This tape, readily available in Iraq, is a major primary source on Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr.

¹⁵ Various explanations have been offered for this reversal. According to Hamid Yasin, the post-Gulf War 1991 Shiite uprising led Saddam Hussein to question the utility of the quietist current. Hamid Yasin, op. cit. Pierre-Jean Luizard suggests the regime wanted Muhammad Sadiq to legitimise its tribal policies. Pierre-Jean Luizard, “Les Sadriyyûn en Irak: un défi pour l'Amérique, la *marja'iyya* et l'Iran”, forthcoming article. David Baran argues that the *Hawza*'s diminishing strength led the regime to fear the growing influence of Iranian religious leaders, and Ayatollah Sadiq, being of Arab origin, was seen as capable of curbing this trend. David Baran, *Vivre la Tyrannie et lui Survivre. L'Irak en Transition* (Paris, 2004). It also may simply be that the regime assessed that Muhammad Sadiq – lacking in popular backing, strongly opposed to both the quietists and to Iran – was its best hope for a docile and acquiescent leadership of a weak *Hawza*.

¹⁶ Hamid, op. cit.

¹⁷ See Nicolas Pelham, *The New Muslim Order: Iraq and the Revival of Shi'a Islam* (forthcoming book).

¹⁸ See Baran, op. cit.

¹⁹ A tribal chief from Maysan, a Muqtada follower said: “In the 1980s and early '90s, I did not know what *haram* (licit) or *halal* (illicit) meant, until Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr appeared. He woke us up and taught us about *shari'a* and God's laws”. Crisis Group interview, al-'Amara, May 2006. This was confirmed by a quietist follower: “We do not deny that Muhammad Sadiq woke us up by teaching us the pillars of Shiite dogma. Beginning in the 1990s, and thanks to him, we started to pay *khums* [a fifth of their profits] and to apply *fatwas*. Unfortunately, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr went too far by trying to undermine the legitimacy of some of the other scholars in order to win over the masses. As a result, Shiites began to insult and make fun of quietist ayatollahs. For example, Sistani was offered a pillow with the words ‘Good Night’ [a reference to his alleged apathy] embroidered on it! Muhammad Sadiq could have issued a *fatwa* prohibiting such jokes, but he did not”. Crisis Group interview, a member of a charity established by Ayatollah Sistani, Baghdad, April 2005.

²⁰ In the *al-Hannana* interview, Sadiq al-Sadr went so far as to suggest that Ayatollah Abulqasim al-Khoei collaborated with the regime to keep him at bay. Sadrist typically accuse quietists of being holed up in Najaf's “caves”, sheltered from repression and shielded from their followers' concerns. See Loulouwa al-Rachid, “Du bon usage du chiisme irakien”, *Politique Internationale*, no.101, Autumn 2003.

²¹ Sadiq al-Sadr advocated the notion of a “field-based *Marja'iya*” (*marja'iyat al-maydan*), an expression that Muqtada's followers use to this day. ‘Adil Ra'uf's book, *Marja'iyat al-maydan*, is a best-seller among Shiites.

to have resurrected the *Hawza* and saved it from further destruction at the quietists' hands.²²

Sadiq focused on making ties between the Shiite population and its religious leadership more direct and less formal,²³ with the goal of setting up the *marja's* "popular bases" (*al-qawa'id al-sha'biya*) in anticipation of the return of the *Mahdi* – the 12th Imam whose reappearance is supposed to herald the end of oppression. In so doing he developed a network largely independent of the state that had brought him back to prominence. In April 1998, for example, he restored Friday prayers (*khutba*), performed by Sunnis but, at least in the more recent period, not Shiites. The *khutba* is, by definition, a political sermon, interpreting the week's events. Because prayers are always led under the auspices of a temporal, earthly ruler, and because the latter is deemed illegitimate in Shiite eyes in the *Mahdi's* absence, Friday prayers were forbidden. Under Saddam Hussein in particular, quietists felt that performing the *khutba* would amount to accepting his rule as that of a "just prince". Sadiq al-Sadr countered this argument by invoking the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* and proclaiming himself *wali amr al-muslimin*, a title vested with the same authority as the ruler (*faqih*) – thereby allowing him to deliver the *khutba*.

In so doing, he issued a triple challenge: to the quietists, who rejected the very notion of *Wilayat al-Faqih*; to Iran, since he was contesting Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's claim to pan-Shiite leadership;²⁴ and to the Iraqi regime, which could not tolerate such outright defiance of Saddam Hussein's absolute rule.²⁵ The latter

was the most risky and, ultimately, costly one. Saddam Hussein saw in Sadiq al-Sadr's growing assertiveness a danger but, despite increased pressure and threats, Sadiq al-Sadr refused to give in. In February 1999, gunmen fired on his car, killing him and his two eldest sons. Sadr evidently had come to accept this as his fate: throughout this period, he wore a shroud as a sign of impending death.²⁶

Unlike the execution of several ayatollahs throughout the 1990s, which barely provoked any reaction, Sadiq al-Sadr's murder sparked violent demonstrations, a testament to his success in building a popular base despite his initial affiliation with the regime and notwithstanding the climate of fear that prevailed at the time. His wide resonance and strength stemmed from his determination to help poor Shiites, listen to them, and give voice to their hopes, as well as from his depiction of the struggle as an expression of both Shiite martyrdom and social revolution.²⁷

Furthermore, he successfully built on popular forms of faith that were disdained or even denounced by the other ayatollahs. Among his more effective initiatives, he highlighted both commemoration of *Ashura* (mourning in remembrance of Imam Husayn's martyrdom in Karbala) and the pilgrimage to Karbala (the *Arba'in*) – religious rituals to which many Shiites of rural origins are more attached than praying five times a day or fasting during Ramadan.²⁸ Even his attitude toward the regime, a blend of courage and resignation, struck an emotional cord with Shiites imbued with the heroism of Imam Hussein's martyrdom, a symbol of the struggle against injustice and tyranny. His writings, which focused on the *Mahdi's* reappearance, appealed to Iraq's oppressed who awaited their own eventual salvation.

But Sadiq al-Sadr was about more than symbolism alone. According to supporters, he was open and welcoming, eager to hear about the poor's living conditions and

²² As explained by a former Sadiq al-Sadr follower, this conflict echoes the tension between the silent, passive cleric (*samit*) and the vocal, active one (*natiq*). "Imam 'Ali himself has said that in each period there were two imams, one *samit*, the other *natiq*." Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, December 2005.

²³ Traditionally, the faithful would ask questions regarding religious practices not directly to a particular *marja'*, but through his representatives, who would then forward the queries and, in return, transmit the *marja's* answers.

²⁴ As applied in Iran, the theory of *wilayat al-faqih* posits that the Supreme Leader must command all Shiites. Sadiq al-Sadr's representatives in Iran were expelled from the country once he proclaimed his authority over Iraqi Shiites. "All ties were broken as soon as Muhammad Sadiq proclaimed his *wilayat al-faqih* because . . . it contradicted Ali Khamenei's *wilayat al-faqih*. I think that is the reason why Iran shut down al-Sadr's offices in Iran at the time". Crisis Group interview, one of Muqtada al-Sadr's representatives in Najaf, January 2006. As stated by a member of the Badr Corps, SCIRI's militia, "Iran's secret service systematically seeks to avoid the emergence of any rival *wali faqih* in the Moslem world". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, April 2006.

²⁵ Sadiq al-Sadr went further, publicly calling on Saddam Hussein to repent.

²⁶ For more on this, see David Baran, op. cit.

²⁷ Sadiq al-Sadr also benefited from the *Hawza's* comparative silence and passivity. "At that time, the scholars all hid in their corner while Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr enjoyed a direct link with the Shiite street and the disinherited. The other scholars had taught us the *taqiyya*, the principle of dissimulation which amounts to remaining quiet in order to avoid danger. By encouraging Shiites to fight the tyrant (*al-sultan al-ja'ir*), Muhammad Sadiq helped bring religion out from the shadow and expose it to the street. By wearing his own shroud, he mobilised us against the tyrant". Crisis Group interview, a teacher, Nasiriya, May 2006.

²⁸ Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London, 2003). See also Pierre-Jean Luizard, *La formation de l'Irak contemporain* (Paris, 1991).

adopting an ascetic lifestyle. One follower summed up the difference between him and his clerical counterparts:

“When I wanted to select an ayatollah as a source of emulation, I asked all of Najaf’s ayatollahs the price of tomatoes. Only Muhammad Sadiq knew the answer”.²⁹

Finally, Sadiq al-Sadr successfully framed his defence of underprivileged Shiites – who often stood accused of being of Persian or even Indian descent – within a broader patriotic discourse that underscored the role of foreign oppressors. His sermons often began with the words “no, no to America; no, no to Israel; no, no to the Devil”,³⁰ and he spared neither the West, the “Zionist entity” nor Iranian claims to Shiite leadership.³¹ He spoke out as harshly against the alleged perfidy of quietists as he did against the secular regime. Dismissing clerics who originated abroad³² as well as Iraqi scholars in exile, he insisted on national unity and sought to straddle the Shiite-Sunni divide. His response to anti-Shiite discrimination was: “There is no Sunna and no Shia. Yes to Islamic unity!”, a slogan one still can see on banners adorning mosques with which he was associated.³³

Sadiq al-Sadr’s purpose was to mobilise the most destitute Shiites and encourage them to assume their full identity,

irrespective of adverse consequences. His was a call for defiance, and it echoed widely: Friday prayers attracted an extraordinary number of faithful, particularly among the young residents of what then was known as Baghdad’s “Saddam City” (renamed Sadr City after the regime’s fall), a sprawling slum-like neighbourhood born of the massive rural exodus of the first half of the twentieth century; up to three million people are said to have partaken in the pilgrimage to Karbala;³⁴ and, after his assassination, the regime had to forcefully put down the resulting demonstrations and put in place tight security measures that lasted for weeks.

Sadiq al-Sadr’s power base was well-defined, and Muqtada’s present-day followers belong to the same social class. The relatively well-to-do, urbanised, educated or commercial classes eyed him wearily, viewing his plebeian, militant Shiism as a source of instability and a threat to their interests.³⁵ The tribal world split into two. Tribes inhabiting the more fertile lands around Najaf and Karbala, many of whose members belonged to the holy cities’ commercial class, kept their distance from Sadiq al-Sadr. In contrast, poorer tribes from the Maysan governorate – which were hit particularly hard by the rural exodus – maintain close ties with their urbanised kin and, as a result, were particularly receptive to the ayatollah’s discourse.³⁶

In short, it would be a mistake to reduce Sadiq al-Sadr’s efforts to a transient phase, a deviation from Iraq’s natural course, or even a failed attempt by Saddam Hussein to co-opt a Shiite leader. Far more, he embodied an authentic social movement, and his struggle against the *Hawza* – unlike Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr’s – brought to the fore a deep intra-Shiite social split between conservative

²⁹ Quoted in Hamid Yasin, op. cit. The same story was narrated to Crisis Group by one of Muhammad Sadiq’s former disciples: “One day, I was sitting with Muhammad Sadiq in his office, when a man came in to ask the price of tomatoes. The question infuriated me: I thought he had come to mock us. But al-Sadr, wiser and smarter than I am, gave him a detailed answer, giving him the price of different kinds of tomatoes. He had understood what the question was about. I caught up with the man as he left the office and asked him why he had asked that question. He replied: ‘In selecting a *marja*’, I choose the one who knows my suffering, who is close to the poor and the disinherited”. Crisis Group interview, Sattar al-Bahadili, Basra, May 2006.

³⁰ Criticism of the U.S. resonated strongly with his constituency given the devastating economic embargo that Washington had been instrumental in imposing.

³¹ That said, he was full of praise for Ayatollah Khomeini.

³² Tensions between Muqtada and the quietist current trace their origins in part to this period. “Ayatollah Bashir al-Najafi [currently one of the four most respected dignitaries in the *Hawza*], whom Sadrists dub ‘Bashir the Pakistani’ to underscore his non-Iraqi origins, has hostile relations with the Sadr current because of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. He was in charge of granting residency permits to *marjas* and to foreign students coming to the *Hawza*. Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr declined to extend Bashir’s residency, and from then on antagonism between the two camps only grew”. Crisis Group interview, a Sistani follower, Baghdad, April 2006.

³³ To prove his point, Sadiq al-Sadr once called on his followers to enter Sunni mosques and pray. Throngs of followers lined up to do so on the next Friday – a spectacular and unexpected show of force that could only worry the regime.

³⁴ See Hamid Yasin, op. cit.

³⁵ Sadiq al-Sadr’s “popular bases” roughly correspond to those their more educated counterparts contemptuously refer to as *Shrug* (urbanised peasants) or *Ghawgha* (lower class mob).

³⁶ “Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was able to mobilise Saddam City, whose residents originally came from al-’ Amara [Maysan] governorate. Whoever says Saddam City says al-’ Amara, and vice versa”. Crisis Group interview, a teacher from al-Nasiriya, May 2006. The neighbourhood in Basra that is dominated by the Sadrists also derives from rural migration. “There is a neighbourhood in Basra that looks just like Sadr City: it is the neighbourhood of Hayaniya. Most of its residents originate from Maysan”. Crisis Group interview, a member of *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, Basra, May 2006. These poorer tribes typically inhabited marshy lands, cut off from the *Hawza*’s influence and steeped in popular forms of religiosity. Historically, they are at the very bottom of the tribes’ social hierarchy: sedentary rice cultivators and buffalo breeders, they traditionally were disdained by more dignified, sheep-raising tribes, and even more so by nomadic Bedouins. Thus they had every reason to latch on to a leader who praised their culture and identity.

sectors for whom quietists symbolised and guaranteed the status quo and more “revolutionary” forces, estranged from existing institutions and to whom Sadiq al-Sadr gave voice. More than anything, Muqtada and today’s Sadrist are this latter group’s heirs.³⁷

C. MUQTADA AL-SADR: THE UNLIKELY HEIR

Muqtada was neither the only, nor the most gifted of his father’s descendants. In the 1990s, he held a relatively insignificant position within the family and was virtually unknown.³⁸ As Sadiq al-Sadr’s fourth son, married, like his brothers, to one of Muhammad Baqir’s daughters, he could claim authority by virtue of lineage but little more. He was far too young and possessed few religious credentials. Even if one accepts his proclaimed birth date, he would have been only 25 when his father was murdered. According to his official biography, he entered the *Hawza* in 1988 and never rose beyond the level of *bahth al-kharij* (pre-graduation research). His critics, and even a few of his allies, have accused him of mental deficiency.³⁹

By all accounts, the former regime never considered him a serious threat. While many of his father’s deputies, representatives and students (including Ali al-Ka’bi, Abdul Sattar al-Musawi, and Ahmad al-Hashimi) and two of his sons (Mu’ammal and Mustapha) were killed, and others were detained (such as Mahmud al-Hasani) or exiled (Sattar al-Bahadili), Muqtada was spared, carefully watched but not threatened.⁴⁰ Along with a handful of

his father’s surviving disciples who remained in Iraq, he was relatively secluded until Saddam Hussein’s fall. His followers claim that, during this period, he led an underground movement; given the regime’s close surveillance, that appears unlikely.⁴¹

In short, Muqtada was by no means his father’s natural heir. Prior to his death and under pressure from his associates, Sadiq al-Sadr had appointed Ayatollah Kadhimi al-Ha’iri, a prominent *marja* of Iraqi origin, as his official successor – or, more precisely, as the source of emulation to whom Sadiq’s followers should turn in the event his writings left a question unanswered.⁴² As a default solution, and given potential problems communicating with the Iran-based (Qom) al-Ha’iri, he suggested Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayadh, an Afghani ayatollah residing in Najaf, who was close to the quietists. Nor did Muqtada enjoy any material advantages: Sadiq al-Sadr’s most important asset, the *khums* (alms paid by Shiites to their *marja*), was conveyed to his legatee al-Ha’iri; the regime confiscated the rest and, as Sistani’s followers acknowledge, the quietists did nothing to help him.⁴³ Even Sadiq al-Sadr’s closest aides shied away from Muqtada, including after the regime’s fall.⁴⁴

and chose a life of seclusion. He currently is ill and stays at home. Crisis Group interview, a Sadrist imam, Baghdad, April 2006.

⁴¹ Several journalists echoed this claim, explaining that is how the Sadrists rose to prominence so swiftly. See, e.g., “Iraqis give top cleric 48 hours to leave”, *Shia News*, 13 April 2004. However, Muqtada’s official biography describes the extent to which Sadiq al-Sadr’s followers were cut off from others, and even in late 2002 a Crisis Group analyst, in a different capacity, witnessed the intensity of the regime’s surveillance of Sadiq al-Sadr’s former disciples.

⁴² Shiite laymen usually are required to follow a living *mujtahid* (a religious scholar entitled to derive legal opinions from sacred texts) and one cannot emulate a deceased *marja*. By designating a “spiritual successor”, Sadiq al-Sadr was breaking with that tradition, seeking to ensure continuity and prevent his followers from turning to the quietists. He also preempted, as much as possible, any need for further religious guidance, infuriating Sistani’s followers: “Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr claimed that he had issued so many *fatwas* covering so many topics that his disciples did not need to refer to any other *marja*. I think it is arrogant. Al-Sistani doesn’t have such pretensions”. Crisis Group interview, a Sistani supporter, Baghdad, April 2005.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, a Sistani loyalist, Kut, May 2006.

⁴⁴ After the regime’s fall, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr’s son, Ja’far, who also was Sadiq al-Sadr’s right-hand man, returned to Iraq from Iran, but kept his distance from Muqtada. Another close associate of Sadiq al-Sadr, Muhammad al-Ya’qubi, founded his own rival movement (*Hizb al-Fadhila*), attracting several of the ayatollah’s students. Some of Sadiq al-Sadr’s disciples judge Muqtada quite harshly, going so far as to disclaim any connection between the movement he leads and the one his father created. “What one sees today is Muqtada’s movement, not a Sadrist one. I think Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr’s followers

³⁷ “Muqtada’s movement was built by his father. All he did was help it evolve and continue the process initiated by Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr”. Crisis Group interview, a director general at the ministry of education, also a member of al-Da’wa, Baghdad, April 2006.

³⁸ “In fact, nobody knew Muqtada al-Sadr prior to the fall of Saddam’s regime. Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was called ‘Abu Mustafa’ [father of Mustafa], in reference to his elder son, who was killed along with his father, and was widely known among Shiites”. Crisis Group interview, a student close to the Sadrist current, Amman, January 2006.

³⁹ An Iraqi businessman close to Muqtada claimed that his father was utterly uninterested in him. Crisis Group interview, Amman, January 2006. Followers of the Sadrist movement fiercely deny this. A member of his armed militia, *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, countered that Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr “named Muqtada director of the religious school he had founded”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, May 2006. Muqtada’s official biography claims that the idea behind the university was his own, and that he assumed a number of other important responsibilities during his father’s lifetime. See www.muqtada.com.

⁴⁰ See Nimrod Raphaeli, “Understanding Muqtada al-Sadr”, *The Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2004. Muqtada’s third brother, Murtadha, reportedly withdrew from the public eye

In the wake of the U.S. invasion, the young Muqtada possessed none of the resources necessary to launch a significant movement. Its emergence was made possible by the convergence of two developments. The upheaval caused by the occupation emboldened the more disadvantaged Shiites and handed them a historic opportunity to achieve their goals. And neither the *Hawza* nor the political process offered them effective forms of representation, the former because it adopted a quietist posture, the latter insofar as it was dominated by returning exiles. But the movement needed a leader, and against all odds, Muqtada al-Sadr played that part.

When, after Saddam's fall, Muqtada first made his appearance by forming his own shadow government and so-called *Jaysh al-Mahdi* militia, many Shiites were shocked. They felt that he was too young, that he was nothing but a *za'tut* [an ignorant child in Iraqi dialect]⁴⁵ who wished to ape his father, Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, and that he quickly would calm down because nobody would follow him. In fact, as his popularity as well as the strength both of the Sadrist movement and of *Jaysh al-Mahdi* grew, perceptions changed. One hardly hears the expression *za'tut* anymore.⁴⁶

are not the same as Muqtada's. Muqtada's activists are a by-product of the war". Crisis Group interview, a follower of Muhammad Sadiq hostile to Muqtada, December 2005. However, others joined him. Shaikh Sattar al-Bahadili, the dominant Sadrist figure in Basra, was Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's representative in that city. Crisis Group interviews, Basra, May 2006.

⁴⁵ *Za'tut* is an extremely pejorative word that members of the clerical establishment in Najaf commonly used to designate Muqtada. One of the *Hawza's* ayatollahs, Muhammad Sa'id al-Hakim, invoked it in a speech delivered in April 2004 that was subsequently distributed as a DVD.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, a student close to the Sadrist current, Amman, January 2006.

II. MUQTADA'S STEEP AND SWIFT LEARNING CURVE

In the short time since the fall of the former regime, the Sadrist movement has grown and evolved in a predictably chaotic, yet surprisingly successful and sophisticated way. Perhaps most unexpectedly, Muqtada overcame his initial marginalisation and an early bloody confrontation with the coalition to become a virtually indispensable actor on both the domestic and regional scenes.

A. FROM CONFRONTATION TO DOMINANT PRESENCE

As described in detail in previous Crisis Group reports, the movement's emergence on the political scene took almost everyone by surprise.⁴⁷ As spectacular as it was disorganised, the Sadrist phenomenon did not reflect the growth of an already-structured movement shedding its prior clandestine status so much as a series of often uncoordinated initiatives. Young imams, invoking Sadiq al-Sadr's name, rushed to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the state apparatus. Surrounded by armed volunteers, they seized control of mosques, welfare centres, universities and hospitals and, particularly in Sadiq al-Sadr's former strongholds, instituted forms of local governance. Saddam City – quickly renamed Sadr City – was the logical power base, but the movement also showed strength in large swaths of southern Iraq. In contrast, in Baghdad neighbourhoods and other cities where Muqtada's father failed to attract significant support, others stepped into the void.⁴⁸ To the extent the Sadrist movement displayed any coherence or unity, in sum, it reflected the social base Sadiq al-Sadr had mobilised during his lifetime and that lost momentum upon his death.

Gradually, this relatively amorphous group of followers of the "second martyr" or "second Sadr" (*Jama'at al-Sadr al-Thani*) gravitated around Muqtada and defined itself in opposition both to the occupation and to other Shiite representatives – the two being closely related since the Sadrists blamed the latter for their alliance with the

⁴⁷ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Iraq's Shiites*, op. cit.; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°27, *Iraq's Transition: On a Knife Edge*, 27 April 2004.

⁴⁸ The Baghdad Shiite neighbourhood of Karrada Zuwiya was informally renamed "Hakim City", a reference to Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). In Hilla, the local Sadrist representative played only a minor role after the regime's fall. In Basra, the Sadrists competed against an array of actors enjoying stronger local roots. Crisis Group interviews, Hilla, May 2003, and Basra and Nasiriyah, October 2003.

former.⁴⁹ Muqtada's swift emergence as leader (*qa'id*) derived from the absence of a serious rival but also, paradoxically, from his own weaknesses. Sadiq's putative heir, Ayatollah Kadhimi al-Ha'iri, is of Iraqi origin but has been based in Iran since the early 1970s and lacks any independent Iraqi constituency; aware of these shortcomings, he seems to have considered Muqtada a useful transitional figure who would pave the way for his eventual return to Najaf.⁵⁰ As a result, he delegated to Muqtada rights that, in principle, must only accrue to a *marja'* (e.g., the right to issue *fatwas* or to receive *khums*), while simultaneously trying to keep a watchful eye over him. Muqtada also turned out to be a leader of choice for *Hawza* dropouts – students who had interrupted their studies, preferring street politics to pious education – and for whom his lack of education was an asset that made them feel better about their own. At the same time, the lineage to the Sadr family and relationship with al-Ha'iri was another face-saver of sorts, and allowed Muqtada's followers to claim some degree of religious legitimacy.

However, characteristics that drew young, uneducated supporters to Muqtada's movement alienated others. In particular, he did not appeal to the more educated,⁵¹ older⁵²

members of his father's "popular bases". More generally, many Shiites were repelled by Muqtada's improvised, disorganised style and demagogic, seemingly futile hostility toward the occupation.⁵³ In their eyes, his populist brand of Islamism masked his chaotic management of daily affairs and lack of a coherent political program. Bereft of discipline or vision, members of the Sadrist movement often drifted toward gratuitous violence, abuse of power and highly controversial decisions. Chief among them was the May 2003 *fatwa* authorising looters and thieves to hold on to their booty so long as they paid the requisite *khums* to Sadrist imams, equating the movement, in the eyes of many, with little more than a criminal gang.⁵⁴ Throughout this early period, in fact, young Sadrist imams roaming the country appeared not to be following Muqtada's orders any more than Muqtada appeared to be listening to Ha'iri.

How, amidst such anarchy, was Muqtada able to consolidate his leadership and surpass the temporary role Ha'iri initially assigned to him? In essence, he did so by reflecting the aspirations and expectations of a good portion of his father's constituency and by being in tune with young, poor, urbanised Shiites. Muqtada, in a sense, was the perfect embodiment of the Sadrist movement. As a member of the Sadr family, he suffered from both the former regime's repression and the quietists' silence and impotence. His subordinate status within his own family further resonated with his social base, which, like him, endured the suffocating authority of a strict, hierarchical Shiite structure that discriminated in favour of an educated elite. Uneducated Shiites thus identified with his lack of training. But Muqtada, by virtue of lineage, could at the

⁴⁹ According to Sadrists, this partnership was based on a convergence of interests between the U.S. administration, the Islamist parties and the quietists. "The Sadrist current is the only Shiite movement whose interests are inconsistent with the Americans'. That is why the U.S. wants to crush *Jaysh al-Mahdi*". Crisis Group interview, a Sadrist Imam, Baghdad, April 2006. Some Sadrists go so far as to denounce Ayatollah Sistani as a U.S. lackey. "We cannot have good relations with Sistani because we are completely different: Sistani says what Condoleezza Rice and Rumsfeld say. How can we agree with that?" Crisis Group interview, a high-level *Jaysh al-Mahdi* leader, Baghdad, April 2006.

⁵⁰ Kadhimi al-Ha'iri's return to Iraq – which, citing security concerns, he has yet to carry out – seems to have been complicated by his Iranian hosts. Like Sadiq al-Sadr before him, he invoked *wilayat al-faqih* to assert his authority over Iraq. In so doing, he directly challenged the Iranian regime's claim to exclusive exercise of *wilayat al-faqih* over the entire Shiite world. According to a Sadrist imam, "Kadhimi al-Ha'iri is not free at all. He is closely monitored by Iran's security services: they constantly watch his headquarters in Qom and read everything coming out of it. He dispatches letters surreptitiously to his representative in Najaf, al-Asadi, by resorting to pilgrims from Iran. Once, when Tehran intercepted such a letter, al-Ha'iri was banned from teaching in his religious schools for a week". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, December 2005. This would help explain why al-Ha'iri has remained in Iran.

⁵¹ A Nasiriya teacher pointed out that for most of Muqtada's supporters education was not considered a realistic means of social ascent. "Today, some of my students belong to *Jaysh al-Mahdi*. But who are they? They are the ones who failed their studies and have nothing else to do". Crisis Group interview,

Nasiriya, May 2006. Tellingly, the most learned of Sadiq al-Sadr's disciples, such as Muhammad al-Ya'qubi, distanced themselves from Muqtada, bringing with them the best educated Sadrists. But they never expanded their circle of influence.

⁵² In contrast to Muhammad Sadiq's era, today Shiite families are likely to split along generational lines. "All over Iraq one sees intra-familial conflicts between members of different generations. Father and son often collide, because the former tends to follow Sistani, while the latter backs Muqtada". Crisis Group interview, a Sadrist student, Baghdad, May 2006. While conducting fieldwork, Crisis Group witnessed several disputes between father and siblings on this issue.

⁵³ Muqtada and his aides issued myriad contradictory pronouncements regarding their objectives and the occupation.

⁵⁴ According to a former Sadrist who now backs Sistani, "many people used to pray on Fridays but they stopped because of the famous *al-hawasim fatwa* [concerning theft]. I myself stopped as soon as Muqtada's office issued the *fatwa* asserting that 'the state does not own anything', allowing Iraqis to take possession and sell these goods, so long as they pay *khums*. One Friday after the regime's fall, when a Sadr representative pronounced this *fatwa*, many people reacted by leaving the mosque. I believe the Sadrist current lost significant popular appeal on account of this *fatwa*". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, April 2006.

same time muster his ancestors' aura. As his father had before him, Muqtada from the outset gave voice to a proud, authentic popular identity while advocating violent struggle against the root causes of oppression. Based in popular perceptions and aspirations rather than in clerical tradition, Muqtada's movement, in short, is more social than religious.

Muqtada demonstrated his ability to reflect and channel inchoate popular feelings as early as his first Friday prayer (*al-Khutba*), delivered in Kufa on 11 April 2003. He asked Shiites to express their piety by undertaking a pilgrimage to Karbala on foot to honour Imam Husayn's martyrdom (the *Arba'in* commemoration). During the impressive procession, pilgrims resorted to archaic rituals, such as self-flagellation – a remarkable occurrence, given that they were firmly denounced by leading *Hawza* ayatollahs.⁵⁵ Coming on the heels of the regime's fall, the massive celebrations offered Shiites a first opportunity to see and measure their new, colossal force. The Sadrist phenomenon benefited from the Shiite community's visibility and, given the media's particular interest in Muqtada, from unprecedented focus on its most destitute members. A journalist who writes for *al-Hawza al-Natiqa* explained: "the emergence of the Sadrist current after the regime's fall essentially occurred through satellite televisions. We were surprised at the time, but in hindsight we realised that, through this acknowledgment, the Sadrist movement was born".⁵⁶

Media recognition did not immediately translate into political recognition – quite to the contrary. In the wake of the regime's fall, the Sadrist community's pent up frustrations expressed themselves in many ways: seizure and looting of longed-for property and goods;⁵⁷ the killing of Baathists and other score-settling;⁵⁸ anti-coalition demonstrations; and anti-quietest violence. Yet, far from extracting political benefit from the regime's downfall, the Sadrists and their constituents remained excluded from the emerging political order.

Sadrists viewed this order as profoundly alien, based on an unnatural alliance between the occupiers and those who had deserted Shiites at a critical moment – Shiite Islamist parties that had chosen exile abroad and quietists who, through their passivity during Saddam's reign, had opted

for internal exile and therefore had forfeited any claim to leadership. In sermons, Sadrist imams blasted exiled politicians who returned after the war;⁵⁹ in some cases, militants took matters into their own hands. On 10 April 2003, a violent altercation in the Imam Ali shrine, in Najaf ended with the killing of Abdul Majid al-Khoei, an exiled scholar who had close ties to coalition forces.⁶⁰ By the same token, Sadrists urged quietist leaders to leave Iraq: activists surrounded the homes of Ayatollahs Ali al-Sistani, Bashir al-Najafi and Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayadh and urged them to flee; the three men were forced to call upon local tribes for help.

Clerics who had cooperated with Saddam's regime, whether voluntarily or not, were the object of particular hatred⁶¹ and deemed most likely to collaborate with the occupier.⁶² Quietists and returning politicians were

⁵⁹ Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, the SCIRI leader, was accused of betraying Iraqis after having called on them to rise up against the regime in 1991. Some Shiites pointed to Sadrist involvement in al-Hakim's August 2003 assassination in Najaf. However, the fact that the car bomb exploded at the doors of the Imam Ali shrine – a location sacred to Shiites – and amid a large civilian crowd makes this highly unlikely. It also is altogether unclear whether they possessed the means to conduct such a large-scale attack, given the amateurishness they displayed during the 2004 confrontation with coalition forces.

⁶⁰ The incident has been described as a premeditated murder by Sadrists intent on eliminating a dangerous rival. In fact, it appears to have been both spontaneous and symptomatic of deep tensions within the Shiite community. Al-Khoei was the son of Abulqasim, a grand ayatollah until 1992 and a quietist figure in Sadrist eyes, and had long ago taken refuge in the West. He worked closely with American and British authorities in the lead-up to the war. Immediately upon returning to Najaf, he sought a key political role. Sadrists considered his very presence in the shrine – particularly in the company of an individual with close ties to the former regime, Haydar al-Kilidar – to be provocative. The incident began with a sharp exchange of words, then of bullets. Sadrists claim that al-Khoei was simply caught in the crossfire, whereas others assert he was targeted.

⁶¹ Many had been forced by the regime to demonstrate their obedience, for example, by issuing specific *fatwas* of a political nature. See Baran, op. cit.

⁶² After the war, Sadrists accused Sistani of contradicting his own writings on jihad by choosing to cooperate with the U.S. "Sistani deleted the chapters on jihad from his book. When we asked him why, he simply said that Muhsin al-Hakim [Abulqasim al-Khoei's predecessor, considered a quietist leader] had done so as well". Crisis Group interview, a leader of *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, Baghdad, April 2006. An armed gang also assaulted Ayatollah Husayn al-Sadr, one of Sadiq al-Sadr's relatives considered close to the regime for succumbing to its pressure (in May 1999, for example, Husayn al-Sadr was dispatched to the Vatican along with the Chaldean patriarch and a Sunni imam to plead for the lifting of sanctions.) The secretary of *al-Sada al-Ashraf*, an association that certifies genealogical links

⁵⁵ *Hawza* ayatollahs issued a very clear *fatwa* but it was largely ignored.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, December 2005.

⁵⁷ While residents of Sadr City have been accused of most of the looting, these in fact implicated the population as a whole. In many ministries, employees took possession of whatever was in their drawers. Crisis Group observations, April-May 2003.

⁵⁸ Some of these were quite spectacular, including a raid on Musayyib which, prior to the war, symbolised military industrialisation (*al-tasni' al-'askari*).

accused of opportunism for suddenly adopting the principle of Friday prayers (*khutba*), which they had denounced as illegitimate during Saddam's years and for which Sadiq al-Sadr had given his life.⁶³ Tensions rose as quietists and former exiles closed ranks and sought to undermine Muqtada, challenging his authority to issue *fatwas*⁶⁴ and advising coalition forces to consider him an enemy.

Muqtada's hostility toward the U.S., which contrasted with the attitude of many other Shiite leaders, was in a way a continuation of his father's policies. As Muqtada saw it, the occupation merely prolonged the oppression that had begun with U.S.-backed sanctions which had disproportionately hurt impoverished Shiites. The coalition's early missteps – notably its failure to implement an effective reconstruction effort and create an inclusive political process – further antagonised the Sadrists.

While U.S. forces praised the other Shiites' "moderation", they perceived, described and treated the Sadrists as dangerous "extremists" who deserved to be ignored or, better yet, pre-emptively arrested.⁶⁵ The combination of U.S. hostility, Sadrist opposition to the occupation, and the overall debacle of the reconstruction process left Muqtada's followers without realistic prospects of either social ascent⁶⁶ or political representation.⁶⁷ As a result,

to the Prophet, was threatened by Sadrists for having established such a pedigree for Saddam Hussein.

⁶³ The decision by other Shiites to endorse Friday prayers presumably was designed to challenge Sadrists on their own field. "In June [2003], the *Hawza* establishment tacitly approved al-Hakim's decision to stage Friday prayers in the Imam Ali shrine ..., in the hope his sermons might attract believers away from Muqtada al-Sadr". Crisis Group Briefing, *Iraq's Shiites*, op. cit.

⁶⁴ *Hawza* ayatollahs openly questioned Muqtada's ability to issue religious edicts. Pierre-Jean Luizard, op. cit.

⁶⁵ While the U.S. appears to have seen Iran's hand behind the Sadrist movement, Sadr is far more independent from Tehran than some of the Shiite leaders Washington has chosen as its chief allies.

⁶⁶ In the words of a Nasiriya teacher, "if the Americans had taken care of the south and created jobs for unemployed youth, the Sadrist phenomenon would not have grown as it did. What happened after the war is that the social elite and those with university diplomas easily found work while the more destitute had nowhere to go but the Sadrist movement". Crisis Group interview, Nasiriya, May 2006.

⁶⁷ "Al-Sadr's...supporters are native Iraqis who remained in the country, endured the Baathist regime and feel represented neither by the returning exiles nor by the less politicised, less populist clerical class in Najaf or Karbala....They feel as marginalised under the CPA [Coalition Provisional Authority] – which has opted to deal with Shiite exile organisations such as the Da'wa and the SCIRI – as they were during the Baathist rule". Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Transition*, op. cit.

the more underprivileged Shiites were left on the sidelines by the de facto alliance between coalition forces, Shiite Islamist parties and quietists.

This conflict between Shiite constituencies gradually radicalised the Sadrists. To begin, it exacerbated feelings of alienation among poor Shiites in an environment that, given the country's widespread chaos, already was conducive to violent protest. It also magnified pre-existing mutual suspicions between the *Hawza* and Sadrists – the former considering the latter as violent, vulgar troublemakers; the latter considering the former as opportunistic collaborators and turncoats. Ultimately, feeling threatened by their increased marginalisation, Sadrists chose to resort to new and more violent means of struggle.⁶⁸

B. TRIAL AND ERROR: THE FAILURE AND LESSONS OF RADICALISATION

The April-August 2004 armed confrontation pitting coalition forces against Sadrists arose out of a vicious circle of mutual actions and reactions. From the outset, and through a series of at times erratic, often impassioned, and virtually always provocative steps, Muqtada asserted his opposition to the occupation. He immediately denounced the Interim Governing Council, the coalition appointed on 12 July 2003, labelling its members infidels selected on purely sectarian and ethnic bases, and, in an 18 July sermon, condemning them as "lackeys of the occupation". Soon thereafter, he established a parallel government. His newspaper regularly published lists of so-called collaborators, tacitly enjoining its readers to kill them. He set up an armed militia of volunteers, *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, which took control of various neighbourhoods; the armed men acted as the police while Sadrist tribunals enforced their version of *shari'a*. In so doing, Muqtada not only challenged the new, proto-government's authority, but also hindered coalition forces' freedom of movement. And he sought to broaden his zone of influence, as attested by his October 2003 raid on the holy city of Karbala.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group wrote in September 2003: "Under pressure and unable to cope with the burden, al-Sadr's appointees appear to have retreated from many of the public institutions and hospitals they previously controlled. Many of the portraits of Sadiq al-Sadr that were put up in mid-summer have been taken down. By late summer, they were a rarity in much of southern Iraq. Al-Sadr's attempt to train a corps, the Mahdi army, to rival the Badr Corps, also appears for now to have produced only a paper force". But, we added, "it would be a mistake to count al-Sadr out. He still enjoys considerable popular appeal and appears in control of significant number of mosques and other institutions to which he initially laid claim. His Friday sermons in Kufa are packed". Crisis Group Briefing, *Iraq's Shiites*, op. cit., p. 20.

U.S. officials saw these actions through a one-dimensional lens. Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, understandably considered Muqtada a threat, but an essentially isolated one, a fanatic agitator lacking any meaningful social base or substantial following.⁶⁹ This was no more, nor less, than an issue of “religious fanaticism” shared by a handful of militants;⁷⁰ firmness, it followed, was the sole appropriate response. Neglecting the movement’s social dimension and popular roots, the coalition focused on reasserting authority through robust means, particularly over Sadr City. Patrols increased, resulting in a growing number of incidents, some of which were unintentional, others deliberate.⁷¹

After several months of low-intensity conflict, far more serious incidents occurred in March 2004. A violent Sadrist raid against a gypsy (*al-Kawliya*) village, anti-American assaults in the south, and, above all, Muqtada’s sermon describing the 11 September attacks as “a miracle and a blessing from God”⁷² alarmed the coalition. Occurring at a time when the political process was threatened by both an expanding insurgency and Sistani’s objections to the U.S.- sponsored political process,⁷³ these events prompted a coalition show of force. On 28 March, a Sadrist newspaper that had reprinted the controversial

sermon was forcibly shut down. On 3 April, Mustafa al-Yaqubi, one of Muqtada’s close advisers, was arrested in connection with al-Khoei’s murder. The next day, the coalition announced an arrest warrant for Muqtada himself.

The clash quickly grew in size and scope, likely involving tens of thousands of Sadrist volunteers. It lasted some six months and brought about significant destruction in Najaf and Karbala, as well as in the Wadi al-Salam cemetery, one of Shia Islam’s most sacred sites. Fanaticism alone cannot explain the intensity of this response.

For Muqtada, the timing was right. The U.S. occupation was more unpopular than ever as Iraqis saw little progress in the security or reconstruction fields. The onset of combat in the south, almost immediately followed by the siege of Falluja and the Abu Ghraib scandal, generated a wave of popular sympathy for the armed insurgency in general⁷⁴ and Muqtada in particular.⁷⁵ Although such cross-sectarian support as he enjoyed did not last long, it gave him the status of a genuine national leader, a transformation that emboldened and electrified his followers.

The vehemence of the Sadrist reaction had another explanation. Coalition forces, determined to resolve this crisis once and for all by detaining Muqtada and disbanding his militia, never offered him or his followers an honourable exit. His Shiite opponents backed and even reinforced this inflexible position: coalition forces could not have entered the holy cities without the implicit consent of *Hawza* leaders for whom the partial destruction of sacred sites was a price worth paying in order to reassert their authority.⁷⁶ In short, the conflict was not simply a struggle against the occupation; it was set against the deep and deepening intra-Shiite confrontation. Even as Muqtada was consistently backed by Shiite as well as

⁶⁹ In his memoirs, Bremer writes: “I’d received increasingly disturbing reports about Muqtada from our able regional coordinator for the Centre South, Mike Gfoeller....He described Muqtada as a ‘Bolshevik Islamist’ who understood only one thing, raw power, and who would stop at nothing to get it. Mike’s analysis was that while Muqtada currently lacked broad popular support, this was irrelevant. He relied on a small, fanatically loyal gang of armed followers, totalling no more than 200 men”. Paul Bremer, *My Year in Iraq* (New York, 2006) p. 129. By March 2004, according to Bremer, his administration believed Muqtada’s loyalists numbered some 6,000 men.

⁷⁰ “He’d taken to wearing a white burial cloth instead of a dark imam’s robe, a symbol that he welcomed martyrdom. Equally disturbing, Muqtada was collaborating with a radical Sunni cleric, Ahmed al-Kubaisi, and was bussing Sunni extremists from the Sunni triangle to the south to augment his small militia....Mike warned that if Muqtada won another standoff with the Coalition, it would greatly enhance his still small following among the Shia. Then we would be faced with a second insurgency, a rebellion not by Baathists and jihadis, but by fanatical Shiites”. Ibid, pp. 190-91. Bremer further claims: “I realised Zarqawi was the mirror image of Muqtada, a *Sunni* Muslim fascist. *Somebody has to stop them both before the poison spreads*”. Ibid, p. 325 (italics in original).

⁷¹ A helicopter tore off an Islamic flag from a pylon, triggering mass protests. While Bremer claimed this was an accident, a video taped by a neighbour established the contrary and became a best-seller among Sadrists by late 2003.

⁷² Bremer, op. cit. p. 313.

⁷³ Sistani’s insistence on a more inclusive process, early elections, and Islam’s status as a primary source of legislation, was a constant worry for Bremer. Ibid.

⁷⁴ “At this point, neither the insurgents in Falluja and the Sunni triangle nor followers of Muqtada al-Sadr represent the Sunni or Shiite communities. But they are tapping into growing pools of dissatisfaction with, and resentment of, the occupation, which in their eyes has delivered neither democracy, nor security, nor economic benefit. Significantly, even if only relatively few Iraqis are prepared to take up arms against the coalition, virtually none are willing to denounce those taking up arms publicly, let alone fight on the Coalition’s behalf”. Crisis Group Report, *Iraq’s Transition*, op. cit. p. 1.

⁷⁵ According to a May 2004 U.S. survey, 81 per cent of those polled had a “better” or “much better” opinion of Muqtada than three months earlier. See “The Iraq Index”, 15 December 2004, www.brookings.edu/iraqindex.

⁷⁶ According to Bremer, at the height of the battle in the heart of Najaf, Muqtada’s followers indicated a readiness to negotiate. “Through intermediaries, I asked Ayatollah Sistani his opinion on conducting direct talks with Muqtada. His reply was swift and unambiguous. ‘We do not know the reason for, or utility of, negotiating with Muqtada’, Sistani said”. Bremer, op. cit. p. 355.

Sunni personalities, he was repudiated by the *Hawza* and, increasingly, by large segments of the Shiite population that, regardless of their initial feelings, saw no future in a lingering and mostly sterile uprising and craved a return to normalcy. Ayatollah Sistani's strategy was straightforward: to negotiate a way out of the crisis only once Muqtada's actions had alienated a majority of Shiites – mostly by harming them economically – thereby reaffirming the conservative clergy's supremacy.⁷⁷

In most respects, Muqtada lost this round of the fight. A large number of Sadrists was killed or wounded, a sacrifice that, in purely military terms, appears to have been in vain. More significantly, the *Hawza* and its allies emerged victorious. The ceasefire Sistani imposed on Muqtada included the disbanding of the Sadrists' Islamic courts, restitution of goods they had seized while they controlled the holy sites, and, above all, their comprehensive and permanent withdrawal from the heart of Najaf.⁷⁸ This last clause was particularly important for it allowed traditional clerical centres of power to reassert their authority over religious and educational sites and reclaim their monopoly over financial and symbolic resources. Najaf once again became the unquestioned fiefdom of the quietists and their circumstantial allies, namely the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI).⁷⁹ This was

made plain when SCIRI repelled an August 2005 attempt by Sadrists to reopen their headquarters in the heart of the holy city.⁸⁰

Beneath the surface, however, Muqtada registered some longer-term successes. "The Mahdi Army, which originally only had a presence in Sadr City, was able to hold its own against the U.S. for months. The losses suffered were terrible, yet they contributed to the image of resistance. Muqtada al-Sadr no longer fears arrest, and any disarming of his militia remains very hypothetical".⁸¹ Though the movement lost any significant presence in Najaf, it won on other fronts: demonstrating its capacity to mobilise, establishing itself as a key interlocutor and negotiating partner, and getting the coalition to abandon its original goal – Muqtada's detention and political neutralisation.⁸² The young leader learned that violence could not accomplish everything, but that it could provide him recognition and acceptance. That was a lesson he would not forget as he gradually shifted his struggle toward another arena.

C. MUQTADA'S POLITICAL ENTRY

After the 2004 crisis, Muqtada shifted gears, describing his transformation as a new means to reach the same goal, the end of the occupation. "The Sadrist movement first resorted to peaceful resistance, then to armed resistance, and finally to political resistance. But this does not present any problem: every situation requires its own

⁷⁷ Economic and practical consequences of the fighting were felt even within Sadr City where inhabitants started to turn against Muqtada. Perhaps most costly to Muqtada was the disruption of pilgrimage-related commerce, particularly within the holy cities; this mobilised against the Sadrists a powerful coalition of those (clerics, merchants, landowners, and tribes) who benefited from such trade. Indeed, in Najaf such losses stirred far more resentment than the damage done to the shrines themselves, which is hardly ever mentioned by Muqtada's critics. "We had to rid Najaf of all Sadrists because there was no more work due to the fighting, which caused Iranian pilgrims to flee". Crisis Group interview, a Najaf resident, January 2006. "As a whole, most Najaf residents blame Muhammad Sadiq and his son because all they brought was destruction and problems. Local tribal leaders see Sistani as a wise man able to peacefully resolve problems. In contrast, they consider Muqtada to be imprudent and crazy". Crisis Group interview, a *Hawza* teacher, December 2005.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ayatollah al-Ha'iri's representative in Najaf, Najaf, January 2006.

⁷⁹ "After having resolved the Najaf crisis, Sistani directed that religious schools belonging to the Sadr family be placed under the *Hawza*'s control and the Sadr family headquarters be moved outside the old city. The al-Hakim family, which leads SCIRI, thus recovered control of the city with Sistani's blessing. It bought several plots of land and buildings and deployed its Badr militia to protect the holy shrines. While SCIRI offices mushroomed in Najaf, the Sadrist movement virtually disappeared from sight. Even Muqtada's pictures could not be found in Najaf's old city. City dwellers view the large-scale return of pilgrims since the

end of the fighting as Sistani's triumph". Crisis Group interview, student with close ties to the Sadrists, Amman, January 2006.

⁸⁰ In return, the Sadrists torched numerous buildings affiliated with SCIRI. The fighting subsided only after leaders on both sides reinstated the status quo. The issue of a Sadrist headquarters (*barani*) in Najaf is highly controversial. Reportedly, *Hawza* ayatollahs went so far as to seek to raze it to the ground, invoking a questionable urban project. "But the offices of al-Sadr, which face Ali's shrine, are being rebuilt. Nobody can forbid Muqtada from returning. You saw how we burned down 450 SCIRI offices in August 2005 when they tried to prevent us from coming back". Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* commander, Baghdad, April 2006. On the above-mentioned urban project, see *The New York Times*, 11 September 2005.

⁸¹ Michel Goya, "La guerre après la guerre", *Doctrine*, March 2005. Although a disarmament campaign was launched in Sadr City in late 2004, it remained essentially symbolic. See *The Telegraph*, 12 October 2004; *The New York Times*, 16 October 2004. "*Jaysh al-Mahdi* did not relinquish its weapons. It will keep its weapons because it does not trust the Americans". Crisis Group interview, Sadrist Imam, Najaf, January 2006.

⁸² Murder charges against Muqtada were tacitly dropped by the Iraqi government, and two of his close advisers who had been arrested in April 2004 (Mustapha al-Yaqubi and Riyadh al-Nuri) were released in August 2005. Associated Press, 15 August 2005.

response”.⁸³ He amended his earlier strategy in two ways.

First, although he maintained his armed militia and the deterrence it afforded, he refrained from aggressive, brazen acts of violence. Of course, the Sadrist movement remained a paramilitary organisation, holding military parades and hinting it could resume fighting.⁸⁴ Unlike other militias, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* was highly visible, erecting checkpoints in Baghdad,⁸⁵ enforcing social mores, patrolling neighbourhoods⁸⁶ and engaging in social work.⁸⁷ Armed attacks continued to be sure: the Sadrist militia killed alleged Baathists and Wahhabis,⁸⁸ while conducting raids against coalition forces, albeit without claiming responsibility.⁸⁹

Muqtada's objective was to improve his movement's reputation by imposing greater discipline. Seeking to distance himself from abuses, he blamed excessive violence on rogue elements and overzealous militants, claiming to be a moderate leader urging calm.⁹⁰ Likewise, he

disapproved of excessively rigorous application of *shari'a*,⁹¹ inflammatory rhetoric, or criminal behaviour, criticising aides who engaged in them.⁹² Muqtada insisted that his followers adhere to an “official line”⁹³ and imposed greater control on rank-and-file militants. “Reacting to claims by Sistani's followers that *Jaysh al-Mahdi* is a gang of uneducated riffraff, in late 2005 he created the Mahdist Institute (*al-Ma'had al-Mahdawi*) to teach Sadrists the basics of Shiite faith and the purpose of the al-Mahdi army”.⁹⁴ An in-house police ensures that militants

aftermath of the attack on the Samarra shrine, a *Jaysh al-Mahdi* commander referred to secret instructions: “Muqtada ordered us to take over the Sunni mosques for an hour. Only after that did he call for calm. This was a very confidential directive: only the principal *Jaysh al-Mahdi* leaders knew of it”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, March 2006. All other *Jaysh al-Mahdi* commanders interviewed by Crisis Group denied this. Another commander mentioned that secret instructions had been delivered in August 2005 when SCIRI offices were set ablaze. “Muqtada instructed us to attack SCIRI offices but this was a secret order”. Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* commander, Baghdad, April 2006.

⁹¹ In his 13 January 2006 *al-'Arabiya* interview, Muqtada took issue with the way in which his followers had imposed *shari'a* in Basra and claimed to have resolved the problem. “As everywhere, some people are overly rigid, others more open-minded....We preach moderation and respect for Islam. Islam should unite, not divide”.

⁹² Numerous Sadrist figures have been demoted in one way or another, although their exclusion from the movement generally is temporary. Among those who fell out of favour are Hazim al-'Araji and Abdul Hadi al-Darraj, who led an independent list in the January 2006 elections (they now appear to have regained Muqtada's trust). Shaikh Abdul Sattar al-Bahadili, a Sadrist leader in Basra, also was censured. “He no longer enjoys the same status within the Sadrist movement because people complained about him. The rumour has it that he offered to reward to whomever kidnapped a British woman. Muqtada al-Sadr isolated him and, like Darraj, he has been demoted and now deals with the press”. Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* member, Basra, May 2006. According to another unconfirmed rumour, al-Bahadili was involved in black market oil transactions. Crisis Group interview, oil ministry employee and Sistani loyalist, Baghdad, December 2005. Other cases include ‘Abbas al-Rubay'i and Hasan al-Zargani. “Al-Rubay'i, the editor in chief of *al-Hawza al-Natiqa*, was excluded from Muqtada's entourage because he acted without prior consultation with Muqtada”. Crisis Group interview, a young Sadrist, Baghdad, April 2006.

⁹³ “Sermons are now consistent: Muqtada writes them for delivery by his representatives because they were saying whatever they wanted and were constantly insulting Sistani as well as leaders of Shiite Islamic parties”. Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* member, Baghdad, December 2005.

⁹⁴ Courses rely heavily on Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's writings and students are given exams to test their knowledge. Crisis Group interview, member of *Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s internal security, Baghdad, December 2005.

⁸³ *al-'Arabiya* interview with Muqtada al-Sadr, 13 January 2006.

⁸⁴ As early as November 2004, the Sadrists threatened to resume fighting in response to the arrest of its militants, which, it claimed, violated the terms of the truce. See Associated Press, 23 November 2004.

⁸⁵ “*Jaysh al-Mahdi* erects checkpoints whenever it wants to. This is something nobody else dares to do, not SCIRI, not any other party”. Crisis Group interview, Sadrist activist, Baghdad, December 2005.

⁸⁶ According to a Sistani loyalist, in Kut “*Jaysh al-Mahdi* arrests alcoholics as well as alcohol vendors and provides security in certain neighbourhoods”. Crisis Group interview, Kut, May 2006.

⁸⁷ “After two bloody revolts against U.S. forces this year, the ‘Sadrists’ are back at what they do best – street politics....Robed and turbaned clerics are back on the streets overseeing the work of al-Sadr's militia...as they organise lines at gasoline stations and heating fuel depots and protect government property”. Associated Press, 28 November 2004.

⁸⁸ *Jaysh al-Mahdi* reportedly has developed an extensive network of informers (*allasa*) entrusted with identifying Baathists and Wahhabis. A young Sadrist imam vehemently denied that the Badr Corps was more active in this area than the Mahdi army. “Of course not! *Jaysh al-Mahdi* is far more present in this field than Badr”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, April 2006. A SCIRI member conceded that *Jaysh al-Mahdi* did more to “protect Shiites” by eliminating “Baathists and Wahhabis”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, April 2006.

⁸⁹ “In Basra, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* attacks British forces virtually on a daily basis. Even though the British are less violent than the Americans, they are occupiers. In police stations throughout Basra, officers hang pictures of Muqtada next to those of destroyed British armoured vehicles. And the British neither say nor do anything about them”. Crisis Group interview, member of *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, Basra, May 2006.

⁹⁰ Muqtada's claim appears at least partly disingenuous. Asked about Sadrist violence that erupted in February 2006 in the

adhere to a stricter code of conduct;⁹⁵ for example, those guilty of corruption have had their heads shaved or been assigned to street cleaning.

As a second part of his new strategy, Muqtada engaged in the political process, participating in the 2005 elections, and, in that context, allying with some Shiite rivals. His decisions showed a degree of political maturity, and they paid off: in January 2005, Sadrist won 23 out of 275 parliamentary seats and performed well in local elections in Baghdad, Maysan and Basra. In December, they increased their representation to 32 seats, giving them quasi veto power within the dominant Shiite bloc over designation of the next government. During negotiations over who would be prime minister, Muqtada assumed the role of Shiite kingmaker. Yet, although he clearly has become a central political actor, he simultaneously keeps his distance, a situation that provides him the benefits of political power while sparing him some of its costs.

Thus, although he has significantly moderated his rhetoric,⁹⁶ he has held to his core principles, namely rejection of the occupation, foreign meddling, and Iraq's partition. A member of the political system, he nonetheless refuses any interaction with the coalition, opposes any U.S. presence, and criticises what he sees as attempts to create a weak central state. As Muqtada portrays it, his political participation is another form of patriotic resistance and therefore is consistent with an array of anti-American actions, ranging from non-violent demonstrations to petitions and even deniable attacks against coalition soldiers.

Moreover, Muqtada has carefully circumscribed his movement's participation to social ministries, gaining control over resources it then reallocated to key constituent groups. In contrast, he let other political actors fight over

more sensitive posts (e.g., defence, interior, foreign affairs, oil) in which they either dirtied their hands by dealing with the coalition or fell short of unrealistic popular expectations.

Muqtada al-Sadr prefers to control the ministries of health, transportation, civil society as well as the municipality of Baghdad. He won't let his followers take over the interior or defence ministries because they entail daily contact with the occupier. Muqtada's strategy is to rally the masses; that's why he wants to dominate service-oriented civilian ministries through which he can gain greater popular support since most Iraqis consider services their number one priority.⁹⁷

Muqtada has also sought to draw a subtle distinction with the Sadrist current (*al-Tayyar al-Sadri*).⁹⁸ Rejecting the legitimacy of the elections in which his partisans ran, he emphatically refused to instruct people how to vote even as he implicitly authorised them to cast their ballots.⁹⁹ Although they are discreetly shadowed by imams tied to Muqtada, Sadrist ministers are all technocrats, not political leaders.¹⁰⁰ Muqtada is cultivating the image of a spiritual guide who spurns what he deems to be everyday, crass politics,¹⁰¹ and offers opinions and advice in the manner of Iran's Supreme Leader.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* commander, Baghdad, April 2006.

⁹⁸ Asked in the aftermath of the January 2006 elections which ministries he wanted, Muqtada replied: "I don't interfere at all with any government, and therefore I don't request specific posts....Ask the current government, I don't speak in its name". Interview on *al-'Arabiya*, 13 January 2006.

⁹⁹ For example, Muqtada condemned the 15 October 2005 constitutional referendum as a byproduct of the occupation, yet he told his followers to heed the advice of the *marjas* – all of whom backed a "yes" vote.

¹⁰⁰ "Every Sadrist minister is controlled by an imam who has been dispatched by Muqtada. The minister cannot do anything his adviser opposes. Qays al-Khaz'ali advises the transportation minister and 'Adnan Rumays advises the health minister"; "in truth, the health minister doesn't have a minister's stature. He merely was a doctor in a Sadr City hospital. Shaikh 'Adnan brought him there. The minister is but a puppet". Crisis Group interviews, ministry employees, Baghdad, December 2005.

¹⁰¹ In an undated speech that was filmed and distributed on DVD, Muqtada explained that his strategy was based on two priorities: "1) to counteract Iraqis' newfound obsession for politics by encouraging them to turn toward religion ... 2) to prove that politics should involve serving the people and not fighting for government posts".

¹⁰² "Muqtada claims to be removed from politics when in fact he ensured that his followers enter the National Assembly. He is using the Iranian method of *wilayat al-faqih*". Crisis Group interview, journalist, Nasiriya, May 2006.

⁹⁵ A member of this in-house police described its role: "We have a unique function; even our identification cards differ from those of other *Jaysh al-Mahdi* members. Our job is to monitor what they do and directly notify Muqtada if anything improper occurs. We communicate directly with him, and he immediately punishes those who are corrupt". Crisis Group interview, member of *Jaysh al-Mahdi* in-house security, Baghdad, December 2005.

⁹⁶ "Muqtada's discourse evolved in significant ways. He is not as extreme and radical as he once was. The rhetoric he used to attack Ayatollah al-Yaqubi, for example, was very harsh and insulting. Generally speaking, he now speaks in a far more tolerant and responsible way". Crisis Group interview, Sadrist imam, Baghdad, December 2005. In his 13 January 2006 *al-'Arabiya* interview, Muqtada put himself squarely at the centre of the political spectrum: "I want a government that is capable of unifying Iraq's Moslems and that can guarantee security. This is only possible with a diversified, patriotic government that brings together all actors. The difficulty stems from the presence of extremists from both sides. Extremism leads to division, not to unity".

Muqtada will not agree to join the government so long as Iraq is under foreign occupation. He even refused that his pictures be used during electoral campaigns. By contrast, he encouraged his followers to display pictures of his father and of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. *Jaysh al-Mahdi* systematically removed every one of Muqtada's pictures that was put up by his followers. As far as Sadrist ministries are concerned, Muqtada proffers advice only; this helps guide the ministries' faithful, assuming they are practicing Moslems. That's why these ministries demand of their employees a letter of recommendation (*tazkiya*) signed by al-Sadr's office or coming from a mosque belonging to the Sadrist current.¹⁰³

Ostensibly outside the political game, Muqtada in fact holds an increasingly central position within it. Owing to the Sadrists' electoral influence, the Islamist Da'wa party sought an alliance, providing Muqtada's movement and its armed branch with greater legitimacy.¹⁰⁴ Muqtada's apparently more flexible approach to federalism¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, transport ministry employee, Baghdad, December 2006. "This method has been used by others: the oil ministry demands a *tazkiya* from the al-Fadhila party, the interior ministry requests a similar letter from SCIRI, the education ministry from al-Da'wa, and so forth". Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* member, Baghdad, December 2005. This was confirmed by other interviewees of various backgrounds.

¹⁰⁴ "Da'wa is an elitist party that lacks a popular base. Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, its leader, also sought an alliance with Muqtada to counter SCIRI's influence. For its part, the Sadrist current needed to get closer to the elite and to competent politicians. Don't forget that Ja'fari enjoys significant legitimacy on account of his religious education". Crisis Group interview, SCIRI member, Baghdad, April 2006. Al-Ja'fari, who served as prime minister from April 2005 to April 2006, reached out to the Sadrists. "Al-Ja'fari tried to exculpate Muqtada by burying the file concerning al-Khoei's assassination. He even released Riyadh al-Nuri, who was personally involved in the crime". Crisis Group interview, Shiite intellectual, Baghdad, April 2006.

¹⁰⁵ Muqtada suggested he could accept a degree of federalism by arguing that it was consistent with Islam and that the issue should be decided after the occupation ended, though it was a type of federalism diametrically opposed to that advocated by SCIRI. "At its core, federalism is an Islamic system and was applied by Imam Ali. Muqtada signed a statement approving the principle. But he opposes its implementation under U.S. occupation". Crisis Group interview, Sadrist *Hawza* student, Najaf, January 2006. That said, and unlike SCIRI, Muqtada opposes its application to the south only (his main support being in oil-poor areas that would not benefit from the creation of a SCIRI-led autonomous region in the south) and insists that the central government retain important prerogatives. His position is reminiscent of Ayatollah al-Ha'iri's, who, as Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's designated legate, remains a reference to many Sadrists. "Al-Ha'iri favours an administrative type of federalism which would allow a Basra resident to resolve administrative

coupled with his increasingly strong condemnation of attacks against civilian Shiites (he called for "the excommunication of the excommunicators" – *takfir al-takfiriyyin*¹⁰⁶ – and his militia intensified its offensive against alleged Wahhabis and Baathists)¹⁰⁷ facilitated a surface reconciliation with SCIRI. His growing involvement in Kirkuk – whose incorporation into Kurdistan he adamantly refuses¹⁰⁸ – has led Kurdish parties to take him seriously and engage him, rather than simply wait for a showdown.¹⁰⁹ Finally, by fiercely defending Iraq's unity and independence on the one hand,¹¹⁰ and carefully avoiding gratuitous verbal attacks against Arab Sunnis on the other,¹¹¹ Muqtada strives to retain, at least formally, a degree of restraint and

issues without having to go to Baghdad. But he staunchly opposes any kind of federalism that would lead to Iraq's partition". Crisis Group interview, Ayatollah al-Ha'iri's representative in Najaf, January 2006.

¹⁰⁶ "Muqtada asked Sunnis to denounce the terrorists and *takfiriyyin*, but they did not act accordingly. So he invented this expression". Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* member, Baghdad, April 2006.

¹⁰⁷ Even members of the Badr Corps emphasise with *Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s central role in "defending the Shiite community". Crisis Group interviews, Badr Corps members, Baghdad, April 2006. As one Sadrist suggested, "*Jaysh al-Mahdi* provides considerable assistance to the interior ministry, a SCIRI stronghold. It provides intelligence and helps secure Shiite neighbourhoods". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, December 2005.

¹⁰⁸ Muqtada has been trying to rally Shiite residents of Kirkuk who moved to the city during the former regime's Arabisation drive. The presence of Sadrists was particularly visible during the January and December 2005 elections.

¹⁰⁹ See *al-Ittihad* (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan publication), 6 May 2006.

¹¹⁰ Muqtada's strong opposition to the occupation earned him, at least until late 2005, considerable popularity within Sunni areas, such as Baghdad's al-A'dhamiya neighbourhood where, in November 2005, Crisis Group heard Sadrist rallying cries. Various Sunni Arab personalities described Muqtada to Crisis Group as reassuring, in stark contrast to other Shiite leaders. "Not all Shiites follow Hakim. The youth, the poor are with Sadr. He has a lot of followers. Sadr represents the Arab line, while Hakim is backed by Iran....Muqtada is very different from other Shiite leaders. I call him a 'unionist'. He is the son of an ayatollah, and Saddam killed his father and brothers, as well as his uncle and aunt. But he represents opposition to Iraq's divisions". Crisis Group interviews, Huda al-Nu'aymi and Wamidh Nadhmi, two secular Sunni intellectual figures, Baghdad, September 2005.

¹¹¹ "Muqtada's discourse is very precise. He speaks of 'honest Sunnis' in contrast to *takfiriyyin*, and Wahhabis"; "Muqtada distinguishes between Sunnis and *takfiriyyin*. Sistani's followers, on the other hand, continually encourage confessionalism. For example, Jalal al-Din al-Saghir and al-Qabanshi, two SCIRI leaders, always provoke Sunnis". Crisis Group interviews, two Sadrist imams, Baghdad, April 2006.

neutrality in an increasingly polarised environment, despite the growing hostility his followers show to Sunni Arabs.¹¹²

At the cross-section of diverse and competing political currents, Muqtada – who in 2004 was chastised as the ultimate outsider, divider, and rabble-rouser – has steadily earned the reputation of a unifier. On 1 December 2005, he organised a conference in Najaf that secured agreement among all members of a Shiite electoral list on a “national pact of honour” (*mu'tamar mithaq al-sharaf al-watani*) reflecting key points, including the withdrawal of occupying forces and the independence of the defence and interior ministries. In January and February 2006, he went on an ambitious regional tour, visiting Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon; Turkey was at the time said to be a future destination.¹¹³

The stated goal was to reach a regional consensus concerning Iraq, and Muqtada aspired to play the role of impartial mediator. Seeking to stay above the fray, he explained:

My presence [in Saudi Arabia] has nothing to do with the formation of a government, or with political and electoral struggles; I prefer to remain far from all that....What I want is to improve ties among the various peoples....I am prepared to resume relations with Saudi Arabia and all neighbouring countries. Our main problem stems from the fact that Saddam Hussein was in conflict with all his neighbours; we, on the other hand, are their friends.¹¹⁴

In short, Muqtada sought to project the image of a statesman solely concerned with Iraq's national interests, stressing the need for tighter border controls and denouncing terrorism¹¹⁵ as well as U.S. mistakes. He presented himself as a regional actor capable of mediating between Iran and the Arab world,¹¹⁶ as well as between Syria and Lebanon.¹¹⁷ He

also tried to reassure neighbouring capitals regarding his own intentions. He succeeded to a remarkable degree, building ties with Tehran (whose sympathy for the Sadrists often has been exaggerated by Western observers),¹¹⁸ mollifying Riyadh and winning over Damascus.¹¹⁹ Long seen throughout the region as lacking experience and credibility, he was welcomed as a central figure and important dignitary.

interview, Sadrist imam teaching at the Mahdist Institute, Baghdad, April 2006.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Sadrist imam, April 2006.

¹¹⁸ As noted above, the Sadrists threaten Tehran's attempts to extend *wilayat al-faqih* to Iraqi territory. Sadrists interviewed by Crisis Group displayed intense hostility towards Iranian meddling and, in particular, towards its growing influence in Najaf. Sadrists who visit Iran are greeted with deep suspicion upon their return. “My brother is an important leader of *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, and he knows Muqtada personally, but when he came back from a pilgrimage to Iran, *Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s commander questioned him several times. He feared that my brother had entered into secret relations with the Iranians”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, January 2006. While Iran probably has provided intermittent monetary and military assistance, the Sadrists apparently have failed to turn this into a regular and sustained relationship. Symptomatically, a conference on regional security organised on 24-25 April 2006 by the Tehran-based Centre for Strategic Research brought together a cross section of Iraqi representatives, but not a single Sadrist, according to one attendee. Nevertheless, Muqtada's diplomatic visit is said to have “improved relations. Muqtada clarified his movement's and *Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s goals. Since that visit, a delegation representing Muqtada has been to Iran in order to further strengthen relations”. Crisis Group interview, Mahdist institute teacher, April, 2006.

¹¹⁹ In meetings in Damascus, Muqtada stressed his attachment to Iraq's Arab identity and challenged the degree to which SCIRI represented Iraq's Shiites. Syrian officials were delighted by what they heard, and their opinion of Muqtada changed radically. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials, Damascus, April 2006.

¹¹² Until early 2006, Muqtada seemed bent on building bridges with Sunni Arabs. “Offices with ties to Muqtada were even recently opened in Ramadi at a time when nobody dared to go there”. Crisis Group interview, Shaykh Fatih Kashif al-Ghita', head of a research centre, Baghdad, November 2005. Since the bombing of the Samarra shrine in February 2006, the Sadrists have increasingly been involved in sectarian reprisals. See below.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat, London, March 2006.

¹¹⁴ Interview on *al-'Arabiya*, 13 January 2006.

¹¹⁵ According to a Sadrist imam, “he wanted Saudi Arabia also to issue a *fatwa* ‘excommunicating the excommunicators’. Unfortunately, the Saudis refused”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, April 2006.

¹¹⁶ “His regional tour was aimed above all at bridging the gaps between regional countries. Muqtada al-Sadr played the role of mediator in order to improve relations between Iran and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen”. Crisis Group

III. THE SADRIST MOVEMENT: AN ATYPICAL PHENOMENON

Although Muqtada has reached a central position on the domestic and foreign scenes, he has done so at the head of a movement that is short of resources traditionally considered critical in Shiite politics, is rife with internal contradictions, and remains both unpredictable and undisciplined. Unsurprisingly, his harshest critics have been fellow Shiites. Attacking Muqtada's and his advisors' lack of legitimacy, they have challenged his affiliation to Muhammad Sadiq's movement; unlike his father whose power was based on knowledge and credentials, Muqtada, they claimed, merely took advantage of the prevailing chaos.¹²⁰ Shiites intent on undermining Muqtada's credibility refer to Muqtada-ists (*Muqtada'iyin*), not Sadrists. More broadly, they describe his power base as a mob-like gang of extremists, dubbing *Jaysh al-Mahdi* either *Jaysh al-wardi* (in reference to the cheap drug popular among poor Iraqis) or *Jaysh Umm Raydi* (in reference to a Sadr City market that is known as the "thieves' souk"). The Sadrists' popular and assertive brand of religiosity has been another target, leading some to accuse them of practicing a bizarre form of faith,¹²¹ or, worse, a Shiite form of Wahhabism.¹²² Likewise, his foes draw parallels between Muqtada's personality cult – manifested in diverse types of iconography, songs reminiscent of those heard under the former regime,¹²³ or public birthday celebrations – and Saddam

¹²⁰ For example, Muqtada's former spokesperson was denounced as lacking all credentials: "At the fall of Saddam's regime, 'Abdul Hadi al-Darraj was unknown in the *Hawza*. He was neither a professor nor a known preacher. One can say that he owes his position to the situation that prevailed after the war". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad university student, December 2005.

¹²¹ In reply to a question concerning Muqtada's popularity, a representative of an ayatollah stated: "Strange phenomena have appeared after the regime's fall. For example, someone in Najaf asserted he was al-Yamani [whose appearance allegedly heralds Judgment Day]. In Hilla, a group calling itself *al-Mahdawiyyun* [which also claimed to be preparing Imam al-Mahdi's return] emerged. They are all deranged but, alas, they nonetheless are able to attract followers". Crisis Group interview, Najaf, January 2006.

¹²² "Sadr is the Salafi of Shiites". Crisis Group interview, (non-Sadrists) Shiite personality holding a high-level government position during Ja'fari's tenure, Baghdad, November 2005.

¹²³ "A melody for a song that had once praised Saddam Husayn now carried a song praising Muqtada". Nir Rosen in *Asia Times*, 16 August 2003. Expressions used to greet Muqtada – such as "the Leader, may God protect him" (*al-sayyid al-qa'id hafadhahu Allah*) – hark back to those used under Saddam. Sadrists newspapers also feature Muqtada's aphorisms, another similarity with the fallen regime.

Hussein's.¹²⁴ Others make the point that the regime's paramilitary "Fedayin Saddam" tended to recruit heavily in the south among those who, today, are most receptive to Muqtada's message.¹²⁵

A. MUQTADA'S POLITICAL RESOURCES

Undoubtedly, Muqtada lacked some of his father's key assets. As a *marja*, Sadiq al-Sadr had access to symbolic, material and organisational resources to which his son did not. His power derived from his authority to interpret religious texts, the distribution of funds accumulated by his headquarters and his large and disciplined network of personal representatives (*wukala*). Muqtada's leadership rests on entirely different pillars.

Lacking religious credentials, he substituted the notion of *qiya* (leadership), for that of *Marja'ia*. A young Sadrists explained:

In the current context, we couldn't care less about the kind of legitimacy that, among Shiites, typically derives from a *marja'ia*. In its absence, what matters is the presence of a leader [*qa'id*] who can guide Shiites. For Sadrists, Muqtada is that leader. Besides, if you re-read Muhammad Sadiq's speeches and writings, you will see that he prefers a *natiq* leader [one who speaks and acts] over a *marja sakit* [who remains quiet].¹²⁶

What binds Muqtada and his father is their similar emphasis on activism on behalf of the masses, meaning both resistance against the oppressor and fulfilment of the people's material needs. Muqtada goes out of his way to underscore his affiliation, mimicking his father's behaviour in minute ways, including linguistic habits and the use of local dialect.¹²⁷ Echoing his father, he mentions seemingly

¹²⁴ Exasperated by the 2004 fighting, Najaf residents began to sing a song accusing Saddam Hussein's mother of having given birth to two disasters – Saddam and Muqtada (*subha jabat ithnayn: Muqtada wa Saddam Husayn*).

¹²⁵ For more on the Fedayin Saddam, which are mistakenly viewed as having been an exclusively Sunni militia, see David Baran, op. cit., pp. 228-230.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, January 2006. "It's true, by definition the *marja* is more erudite, but what we need is someone who can lead us on the ground [*qa'id maydani*], and Muqtada proved himself in that way, through both his words and deeds. *Marja'ia* is one thing; leadership is another". Crisis Group interview, Sadrists imam, al-'Amara, May 2006.

¹²⁷ Muqtada's speeches, like his father's, repeatedly use the word *habibi* (my love) and are interspersed with short, guttural puffs.

second-order demands, such as the reconstruction of Saudi Shiite shrines.¹²⁸

Yet there is one fundamental distinction: while Sadiq al-Sadr sought to reestablish ties between the *Hawza* and the people, Muqtada aims to bypass the *Hawza*, challenging its rules and undermining its authority.¹²⁹ Thus, although Ayatollah Kadhim al-Ha'iri withdrew his formal endorsement of Muqtada,¹³⁰ the young Sadr continues to assert the rights of a *marja'*, such as leading Friday prayers and collecting *khums*.¹³¹ To be sure, Sadiq al-Sadr also disputed the *Hawza*'s knowledge and erudition-based hierarchical structure; but Muqtada has taken this a significant step further, entirely discarding the concept that legitimacy flowed from academic credentials. Instead, Muqtada has promoted the idea of an inspirational, innate type of legitimacy, which resonates well with popular belief in the eventual reappearance of the hidden Imam, *Imam al-Mahdi*. This played an important part, for instance, in the creation of *Jaysh al-Mahdi*.

Do not underestimate the significance of symbols. Symbols are what led volunteers to join *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, because its soldiers will form the nucleus upon which Imam al-Mahdi will rely when he reappears. In their discourse and speeches, Sadrist in general and Muqtada in particular often cite this image. Most Shiite scholars invoke Imam Husayn – but Muqtada appeals to the Hidden Imam to electrify the masses.¹³²

¹²⁸ “Muqtada asked the Saudis to rebuild the tombs of imams buried in Saudi Arabia, suggesting the *Hawza* would cover the costs. That is exactly what his father did before him”. Crisis Group interview, young Sadrist imam, Baghdad, December 2005.

¹²⁹ According to one of Muqtada's representatives in Maysan, “the first Sadr focused on the elite and tried to connect it to the *Hawza*; the second focused on the masses and tried to connect them to the *Hawza*”, and the third addresses himself directly to the masses, bypassing the *Hawza* altogether. Crisis Group interview, al-'Amara, May 2006.

¹³⁰ “Al-Ha'iri withdrew his backing because Muqtada never consulted him, in particular on critical issues such as the establishment of *Jaysh al-Mahdi* or the battle of Najaf. Al-Ha'iri's endorsement never meant that Muqtada could act independently of him. Our representative in Basra, for example, consults us before he does anything”. Crisis Group interview, Ayatollah al-Ha'iri's representative in Najaf, January 2006. According to some reports, al-Ha'iri blames Muqtada for having made his re-establishment in Najaf impossible.

¹³¹ Muqtada appears to receive at least some of the *khums* traditionally owed to a *marja'*. “I think Muqtada has resumed collecting *khums*. He based this on one of his father's *fatwas* which provides that '*khums* must be spent in a manner that satisfies Imam al-Mahdi'. If Muqtada uses his *khums* to help orphans and the poor, it satisfies him”. Crisis Group interview, Sadrist *Hawza* student, Najaf, January 2006.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, student close to Sadrists, Amman, January 2006.

Jaysh al-Mahdi's shortcomings are explained through this prism – in which Muqtada himself often is likened to the Hidden Imam¹³³ – as are Saddam's downfall and the U.S. occupation.¹³⁴ Other rumours and myths surround Muqtada, which he is careful not to deny.¹³⁵ Muqtada's leadership thus rests on two pillars, both of which are independent of the religious institution: he holds the promise on the one hand of the people's social revenge (insofar as he defends their interests) and of their eschatological revenge on the other (in the sense that he heralds Imam al-Mahdi's reemergence).

Muqtada's management of material resources also differs markedly from his father's. Sadiq al-Sadr operated according to tradition, centralising assets and redistributing them in clientelist fashion. Muqtada promotes a system under which his followers take direct possession of whatever resources they can acquire – a far more fluid leadership style in which he directs less than he referees and adjudicates. Part of the explanation, of course, is that the Sadrists' revenue sources are quite limited. The *khums*

¹³³ “You must read Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's book, the *Encyclopedia of Imam al-Mahdi*, to understand our army. Other movements accuse us of ignorance and corruption; but that is not important because even the prophet's army had its flaws. In theory, according to the book, Muqtada need assemble only ten loyal followers in order to reach paradise” (meaning Muqtada's loyalists' best deeds in serving the Mahdi outweigh by far *Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s worldly failings). Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* member, Baghdad, December 2005.

¹³⁴ “Many people think the Americans came to kill Imam al-Mahdi, and many think that Muqtada is Imam al-Mahdi”. Crisis Group interview, Sadrist *Hawza* student, Baghdad, January 2006. Some Sadrists imams consider this to be one of the movement's assets but also a fundamental flaw. “If Muqtada were to die, these people would be seriously disappointed because they refuse to understand that Muqtada is a human being like us. The Sadrist current's problem lies in its members' lack of education and culture”. Crisis Group interviews, Najaf, January 2006. “Everything that is happening in Iraq is heralding Imam al-Mahdi's reappearance. The imposter's [*al-dajjal*, a kind of antichrist, here a reference to the U.S.] entry into Iraq is one such sign. Muhammad Sadiq often had spoken of these signs, including the arrival of Western secret services in Iraq, operating against the regime”. Crisis Group interview, Mahmud al-Hasani's (one of Muhammad Sadiq's former disciples) representative in Nasiriya, May 2006.

¹³⁵ “There are two principal rumours among Muqtada's followers. According to the first, which had a considerable impact on Sadrists, Muhammad Sadiq had said that Imam al-Mahdi's father would be a scholar, making Muqtada a possible candidate. According to the second – which is a response to claims that Muqtada does not possess the requisite legitimacy – when he was a *Hawza* student, he used to ask dazzling questions (*ishkalat*) in Ayatollah Muhammad Ishaq al-Fayadh's class. As a result, Muqtada was able to skip a class and was declared a *marja'*”. Crisis Group interview, Sadrist imam, Baghdad, December 2005.

and other religiously-inspired contributions come from a particularly impoverished social base;¹³⁶ while foreign funding (especially of Iranian origin) cannot be ruled out, there is not evidence or reason to believe that it is either recurrent or substantial. Moreover, the importance Muqtada attaches to public service ministries partly reflects the fact that he lacks a self-sustaining network of social, educational and health-related institutions, unlike SCIRI and leading *Hawza* ayatollahs. All Sadrist interviewees by Crisis Group cited resources that were both local and modest, including DVD sales¹³⁷ and advertising published in the movement's newspapers.¹³⁸ In contrast to SCIRI and the clerical leadership, which are engaged in a sharp competition for the loyalty of *Hawza* students,¹³⁹ Muqtada simply does not seem capable of keeping up a typical clientelist network.

Even *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, which one is tempted to see as the Sadrist movement's hard-core, for the most part is self-financed. All members underscore the personal sacrifice they endure on behalf of the cause, for example by purchasing their own weapons.¹⁴⁰ According to some

reports, Muqtada occasionally pays his fighters, but the amounts suggest limited and sporadic support.¹⁴¹ However, practically speaking, and by virtue of their status, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* members have access to various forms of legal and illegal funds. Recruited as security personnel by ministries under Sadrist control,¹⁴² they also borrow ministry cars to carry out their missions.¹⁴³ Some of those responsible for protecting gas stations are said to be involved in an oil-related black market.¹⁴⁴ Likewise, those providing security at popular markets are believed to engage in racketeering; in some instances, merchants are said to have been beaten for not having paid their "protectors". Worse, the anti-Wahhabi and anti-Baathist campaign appears to have become a profitable source of revenue, as *Jaysh al-Mahdi* members allegedly confiscate their victims' belongings.¹⁴⁵

That said, one ought not underestimate the importance of symbolic, self-gratifying rewards, particularly in a movement such as *Jaysh al-Mahdi* that is comprised essentially of destitute volunteers. Not only can they take pride in their mission's nobility, but they also benefit from concrete forms of power and prestige: they carry weapons, can impose their will, notwithstanding traditional social

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, small Sadrist trader from Kadhimiya, Baghdad, January 2006. "Porters in the *shurja* souk are all Sadrists, while merchants are all Sistanists". Crisis Group interview, young Sadrist engineer, Najaf, January 2006.

¹³⁷ "We are funded by our cultural institutions, such as the press and al-Huda, a large DVD production company". Crisis Group interview, Sadrist student, December 2005. Elaborate DVDs featuring Sadrist songs or sermons are bestsellers among Muqtada's followers.

¹³⁸ "Ministries controlled by Sadrists take out advertising in *al-Hawza*. It is a kind of indirect funding". Crisis Group interview, Ministry of Transport and Communications (at the time a Sadrist ministry) employee, Baghdad, December 2005.

¹³⁹ Student accounts testify to the intensity of this rivalry. "Al-Hakim's institution [*Mu'assasat al-Hakim*, a combination of library, printing house and school] spends huge sums of money in the *Hawza*. It pays students 50,000 dinars [approximately \$35] per month, which is much more than what other scholars pay. The only prerequisite is for the student to present a *tazkiya* (formal endorsement) from Sistani and two from other *Hawza* teachers. Ayatollah Khamenei's institution offers equivalent scholarships; it also has opened a library where students can borrow – and sometimes acquire – books. The other day, I brought back to Baghdad about fifty boxes full of books". Crisis Group interview, *Hawza* student loyal to Sistani, Najaf, January 2006. Figures denoted in dollars (\$) in this report refer to U.S. dollars.

¹⁴⁰ "I had to spend 1,000,000 dinars during the Najaf crisis [approximately \$700]. A friend had to spend \$2,000"; "*Jaysh al-Mahdi* members buy their own weapons and drive their own cars. They don't receive a salary because it is an ideological army [*Jaysh 'aqa'idi*] that only works for God"; "Muqtada basically does not fund *Jaysh al-Mahdi*; *Jaysh al-Mahdi* funds itself. Volunteers use their personal Kalashnikovs and guns". Crisis Group interviews, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* members, Baghdad, December 2005, January 2006. Pointing to differences with the Badr Corps, a SCIRI member confirmed this: "*Jaysh al-*

Mahdi is not organised like a proper army. Its members do not receive a salary". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, April 2006.

¹⁴¹ In May 2006, at the height of tensions between Sadrists and British forces in Basra, a fighter boasted of a \$6,000 donation by Muqtada to *Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s local branch. Crisis Group interview, Basra, May 2006.

¹⁴² "*Jaysh al-Mahdi* is responsible for security at the ministry. Its members also protect hospitals. All those who work in this capacity are paid by the ministry of health". Crisis Group interview, Sadrist health ministry employee, Baghdad, January 2006.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Sadrist imam, Najaf, January 2006.

¹⁴⁴ "The most important source of funds comes from gas stations in Shiite neighbourhoods. *Jaysh al-Mahdi* controls many of them. Its members sell gas at ten times the official price. When they sell it on the black market, they make even more. A high-level Sadrist in the oil ministry helps them out. But when Muqtada heard about it, he banned his followers from protecting the gas stations in question". Crisis Group interview, oil ministry employee, Baghdad, December 2005. This account was denied by a Sadrist: "These are only rumours. The only thing *Jaysh al-Mahdi* has done is protect gas stations". Crisis Group interview, December 2005. That said, a *Jaysh al-Mahdi* member acknowledged that Sadrists were implicated in gasoline contraband, though he added that Muqtada had put an end to it. Crisis Group interview, Basra, May 2006.

¹⁴⁵ "Some *Jaysh al-Mahdi* members claim the right to take possession of goods belonging to *takfiriyyin*, Salafists and Wahhabis they killed. I am a small-time salesman of used cars. On several occasions members of *Jaysh al-Mahdi* offered to sell me cars they had taken from *takfiriyyin*. They have to do that to fund their operations". Crisis Group interview, Muqtada sympathiser, Baghdad, May 2006.

barriers,¹⁴⁶ and can impose their moral edicts.¹⁴⁷ A volunteer explained:

We are the foundation upon which the Hidden Imam counts in order to establish justice. We are the announcers of his reappearance. Don't you think these are sufficient motivators? The Mahdi Army comprises several squadrons; within working-class neighbourhoods, the one named "prescribing good and prohibiting transgression" (*al-'Amr bil Ma'ruf wa al-Nahi 'an al-Munkar*) exercises the greatest influence. *Jaysh al-Mahdi* leaders carefully select its members, opting for those most likely to inspire respect and fear, for theirs is a difficult mission: to arrest thieves, alcohol dealers, and so forth. They act virtually as policemen, carrying handcuffs and punishing offenders. They carry specific *Jaysh al-Mahdi* identification cards.¹⁴⁸

For some young Iraqis, these cards may be reason enough to join, for they symbolise a degree of authority that otherwise would be unattainable.

B. AN UNSTRUCTURED MOVEMENT

Although it has improved over time, Muqtada's control over the Sadrist movement at best is mixed. Today, a semblance of structure exists, with a network of institutions called "Offices of the Second Martyr" (*Makatib al-Shahid al-Thani*), themselves sub-divided into smaller, specialised committees (dealing with economic matters, social or political affairs and press relations).¹⁴⁹ These offices and

committees, which are led by individuals selected by Muqtada,¹⁵⁰ oversee the movement's non-paramilitary activities¹⁵¹ and form the link with the local population. The offices also comprise an arbitration committee, made up of local tribal chiefs, in charge of conflict resolution. "If someone has a complaint, he must bring it to the Office of the Second Martyr. Today, people would rather lodge their grievance at that office than the police station, which does nothing. The Arbitration Committee is well organised. It summons the relevant people, and the matter is adjudicated after the various parties have been heard".¹⁵²

The movement's armed wing has developed as a parallel, autonomous body. "*Jaysh al-Mahdi* operates independently of the Sadrist civilian structures. Each squadron is run by a commander who may turn to a turbaned leader (i.e., a cleric) for guidance, although this reportedly is a rare occurrence. There also is a Judgment Committee devoted exclusively to *Jaysh al-Mahdi*. The committee questions soldiers in the event they violate rules and also questions those who use our uniform as a disguise to obtain some administrative favours".¹⁵³ *Jaysh al-Mahdi* also has an intelligence branch, making it a useful instrument for the police and interior ministry.¹⁵⁴

This semblance of organisation should not be exaggerated. Sadrists remain essentially undisciplined, and Muqtada's recurring reprimands or punishments do little to prevent a steady flow of dissent and disorder at all levels.¹⁵⁵ In

¹⁴⁶ A Baghdad hospital doctor spoke of the power Sadrists exercise even over people enjoying considerable prestige and respect: "After a problem arose at the hospital, the Sadrists ordered all its doctors to appear before a religious judge. We call him Abul-Tshanbir [street merchant]; he is a crook. We all vanished because we were afraid. Even the health minister can't do anything against the religious judge. We tremble whenever one of *Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s members must be treated at the hospital because they all threaten us with their weapons. Doctors are absolutely right to emigrate. I don't want a *radud* [religious singer, here used as a pejorative surname] to tell me what to do. It's incredible". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, May 2006.

¹⁴⁷ "*Jaysh al-Mahdi* arrests all alcohol merchants and prohibits hairdressers from working. It even has barred photographers from exposing pictures of women with make-up or without a veil". Crisis Group interview, Sadr City resident, December 2005.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* member, Baghdad, December 2005.

¹⁴⁹ These offices are in charge of a number of *Husayniyat* (small mosques in which Friday prayers are not held) where ordinary prayers, mourning, and other cultural activities take place. "These *Husayniyat* are directed by the neighbourhood office. In the event of a threat, Sadrists sound the alarm at the level of the

Husayniyat". Crisis Group interview, Sadrist student, Baghdad, January 2006.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior member of *Jaysh al-Mahdi* and Sadrist imam, Baghdad, April 2006.

¹⁵¹ One of the most important such activities is the resettlement of families forced to flee their residence as a result of sectarian violence. Crisis Group interview, Mahdist Institute teacher, Baghdad, April 2006.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, student and Sadrist sympathiser, Amman, January 2006. Tribal justice typically entails payment of monetary compensation (or, if that is not possible, recognition of one's right to exact revenge) and therefore renders moot other forms of penalty, such as detention.

¹⁵³ "By contrast the Arbitration Committee only looks into civilian matters". Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* commander, Baghdad, March 2006.

¹⁵⁴ "*Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s situation is only getting better: it now has an intelligence network. Its leaders know everything". Crisis Group interview, Sadrist employee at the transportation ministry, January 2006.

¹⁵⁵ "As far as Muqtada's control is concerned, there are countless instances where his authority is transgressed, notably by *Jaysh al-Mahdi* commanders. But Muqtada has a powerful tool to confront those who violate the rules and the law: the power of *al-tafsiq* [the power to ostracise an individual by accusing him of depravity and impiety]. It is a very strong weapon. Theoretically, only a *marja* can issue a *tafsiq fatwa*. But among Sadrists, the leader can take such a decision. Muqtada resorted to it against

May 2006, Crisis Group witnessed a feud within one of *Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s units; it split into two groups that disagreed over how to behave toward a suspected Baathist. Interestingly, though they took diametrically opposed stances, both remained members of the Sadrist movement. Examples of "dissidents" who have been rebuked and yet remain integral members of the movement are so numerous that it often is difficult to know whether or not someone has truly been excluded.¹⁵⁶

On the whole, Muqtada appears to lead by consensus, allowing subordinates without any independent legitimacy to benefit from his own, defining the movement's broad vision, and launching initiatives such as the pact of honour, yet at the same time tolerating – perhaps even manipulating – a degree of political freedom within his movement. There seemingly is no fixed decision-making structure, no politburo or established arena for debate or consensus-building. If Muqtada has political advisers, the secret is well kept.¹⁵⁷ By most accounts, he proceeds through informal consultation.¹⁵⁸ Whatever coherence exists is thus less a function of organisational structure than of the social cohesiveness of the movement's base, the absence of any serious rival to Muqtada, his subordinates' utter dependence on him, as well as the ambiguities inherent in his positions which allow him to appeal to contradictory constituencies.

certain *Jaysh al-Mahdi* commanders and against Fatah al-Shaykh, a Sadrist member of parliament who repeatedly exploited Muqtada's name and fame. Muqtada said 'stay away from him, as if he were struck with an incurable illness'". Crisis Group interview, Sadrist imam, Baghdad, December 2005.

¹⁵⁶ The most emblematic case is that of *al-Risaliyun*, one of the lists that competed in the December 2005 elections against the rival 555 list, which most Sadrists had joined. Muqtada's own followers seemed utterly confused by the whole affair. "I've heard of two theories. According to the first, the establishment of *al-Risaliyun* was a tactical move that allowed Muqtada to gain additional seats by appealing to Shiites who objected to any alliance with Sistani and SCIRI. According to the second theory, it reflects a genuine split among Sadrists"; "The leaders of *al-Risaliyun* are 'Abdul Hadi al-Darraj and Fatah al-Shaykh. The latter represented Muqtada's current in the parliament, but Muqtada has since disowned him. I am not sure either man really split, though on the surface they drifted away from Muqtada". Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, December 2005. Al-Darraj, while losing his position as Muqtada's spokesman, nonetheless remained his press attaché.

¹⁵⁷ Various Sadrist personalities interviewed on this matter by Crisis Group either declined to answer or professed not to know.

¹⁵⁸ According to Sattar al-Bahadili, a Sadrist figure in Basra, Muqtada occasionally assembles ad hoc committees charged with describing the pros and cons of a given decision. Crisis Group interview, Basra, May 2006. According to some sources, a tribal committee coordinates with tribal chiefs.

IV. THREE POTENTIAL SOURCES OF CONFLICT

In the current context, a repetition of the 2004 armed confrontation between Sadrists and coalition forces appears unlikely. Leaders of the Sadrist movement repeatedly stress that, despite what they call numerous U.S. provocations, Muqtada will not fall into the trap of open warfare. Still, there exist three sources of potentially violent conflict.¹⁵⁹

An Intra-Shiite Conflict. Despite recent electoral alliances and the appearance of harmony, tensions between Muqtada and other Shiites actors remain strong. Sadrists have not abandoned their ultimate objective of building a presence in Najaf's old city, which they view as an important prize in the ongoing battle for influence, and they continue to resent both Iran's and the quietists' palpable influence in the city.¹⁶⁰ At bottom, this remains an essentially social conflict between a middle-class, commercial elite and the Sadrist lower-class masses. For the time being, worsening Sunni-Shiite violence is overshadowing all else; paradoxically, however, by encouraging the use and reinforcement of various armed militias, sectarian clashes also are laying the seeds of future intra-Shiite conflict. To *Jaysh al-Mahdi* and the Badr Brigades now must be added the armed wing of *al-Fadhila*, a group that also claims affiliation with Muhammad Sadiq and whose rivalry with the Sadrist movement could very well worsen.

A Conflict over *Jaysh al-Mahdi*. Just as the alarming strengthening of armed militias presents a threat, so too would precipitous attempts to disarm them. Partly in response to U.S. pressure, Prime Minister al-Maliki announced he would implement tough measures to dissolve and reform militias.¹⁶¹ Should he carry this through, he is likely to begin with Baghdad, where *Jaysh al-Mahdi* is the most visible, active and powerful militia. Already, in April-May 2006, Crisis Group witnessed the coalition's far more vigorous posture towards the Sadrist militia, arresting scores of its members, particularly volunteers

¹⁵⁹ The possibility of a conflict opposing Sadrists and Kurds over the issue of Kirkuk will be discussed in a subsequent Crisis Group report.

¹⁶⁰ Muqtada's representative in Najaf used extremely harsh words towards those currently controlling the city – namely the quietists, SCIRI and Ayatollah Khamenei's highly active office. He was particularly incensed by the fact that loudspeakers throughout the city air songs lauding Sistani. Crisis Group interview, Najaf, January 2006.

¹⁶¹ "Militias will face maximum force says new leader", *The Times*, 22 May 2006.

manning checkpoints outside of Sadr City.¹⁶² Sadrists blame this on a conspiracy between the U.S. and its local allies (Kurds, SCIRI and quietists), all of whom purportedly were frightened by *Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s show of force after the February 2006 attack on the Samarra shrine and have since decided to weaken it.¹⁶³ Added to this, and exacerbating the Sadrists' sense that they have become the primary target, rumours abound regarding purported U.S. plans to apprehend Muqtada.¹⁶⁴

While the issue of Iraq's numerous militias is a serious one that needs urgent attention,¹⁶⁵ disproportionate focus on *Jaysh al-Mahdi* carries significant risk. Should the Sadrists feel they are being unfairly targeted, and should pressure increase, they may well resort to localised violence, particularly if certain redlines are crossed, including the arrest of key figures¹⁶⁶ or challenge to *Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s virtual control over Sadr City.¹⁶⁷ Disarmament, therefore, ought to be a gradual and negotiated process. Disarming *Jaysh al-Mahdi* presents other difficulties, insofar as Sadrists refuse to consider it a militia that can be either disbanded or integrated into state security forces, seeing

it instead as a spontaneous, popular movement endowed with religious legitimacy.¹⁶⁸ The movement's very loose discipline and the way in which Muqtada exercises power also suggest that many volunteers would ignore him were he to call for its demobilisation, unless they were offered serious and tangible employment opportunities and prospects for social advancement.

The Sectarian Conflict. The most worrying source of tension relates to the growing sectarian schism and, as a consequence, the Sadrist movement's increasingly confessional character. As tensions grow, so too does the movement's involvement in the dirty war that pits Sunnis against Shiites. Several Sadrists known for their pro-insurgency sympathies are under intense pressure from a more and more anti-Sunni rank-and-file to change their stance.¹⁶⁹ Muqtada himself has maintained his calls for national unity, even in the wake of particularly vicious attacks against Shiite civilians and even as attacks have triggered large-scale Sadrist reprisals.¹⁷⁰ But the February 2006 Samarra incident appears to have been a turning point. Since then, violence has reached alarming proportions as Sadrists invoke religious arguments to wage indiscriminate attacks against so-called *takfiriyyin* and Baathists.¹⁷¹

¹⁶² "There used to be a plethora of *Jaysh al-Mahdi*'s checkpoints in Shu'la and around Sadr City; now they are disappearing. The Americans arrest all those who set them up. Muqtada is calling for calm, and *Jaysh al-Mahdi* is hiding its weapons in order to avoid a confrontation with the U.S. The Sadrist current is the only one whose interests clash with the Americans'. That's why the Americans want to repress us. As a result of U.S. pressure, even the Mahdist Institute has stopped offering classes for the time being. Right now, we are being hounded by the Americans". Crisis Group interview, Mahdist Institute teacher, Baghdad, April 2006.

¹⁶³ "The Americans got scared when they saw how *Jaysh al-Mahdi* reacted to the event: Baghdad fell under our control within two hours"; "From then on, the Americans began attacking us and arresting our leaders. Muqtada urged us to remain calm, because he knows that the Americans want to provoke him and start a new battle. He is well aware of the Americans' game: just listen to the U.S. ambassador, and you'll see he always focuses on the 'elimination of militias'. He means *Jaysh al-Mahdi*". Crisis Group interviews, members of *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, Baghdad, March/April 2006.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Sadrist imam, Basra, April 2006.

¹⁶⁵ Beginning the process of disbanding militias, including *Jaysh al-Mahdi* is, of course, a priority. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006. All the same, the process must be carefully and incrementally implemented, and effective ways must be found to compensate demobilised fighters

¹⁶⁶ The September 2005 arrest by UK forces of Ahmad al-Fartusi, a Sadrist leader in Basra accused of planning attacks on coalition forces, quickly led to widespread disturbances. See *The Christian Science Monitor*, 21 September 2005.

¹⁶⁷ A September 2005 U.S. effort in Sadr City to arrest individuals suspected of armed attacks triggered a brief but significant wave of violence. See *The Chicago Tribune*, 26 September 2005.

¹⁶⁸ "*Jaysh al-Mahdi* is not a militia but an ideological army [*jaysh 'aqa'idi*] comprising doctors, professors, workers and so forth. How can it be disbanded or merged with the state's security apparatus?" Crisis Group interview, Sadrist tribal chief, al-Amara, May 2006. "Besides, the true leader of *Jaysh al-Mahdi* is none other than Imam al-Mahdi. Who would dare disband the Mahdi's army?" Crisis Group interview, Mahdist Institute teacher, Baghdad, April 2006.

¹⁶⁹ "The figure best known for his sympathetic views of the Sunni resistance is Abdul Hadi al-Darraji, Muqtada's former spokesperson and current press attaché. On several occasions he has approved of Sunni-perpetrated terrorist operations; Sistani's followers hate him for that, as do numerous Sadrists". Crisis Group interview, Sadrist sympathiser, Baghdad, December 2005.

¹⁷⁰ For example, Muqtada called for calm after the October 2005 clashes between Sunni fighters and Sadrists who had deployed in Nahrawan, south of Baghdad, in reaction to an earlier attack against a marketplace. Reuters, 28 October 2005. Nevertheless, some have questioned Muqtada's sincerity. "Sadrists and Sunnis were allied around a common goal, the U.S. withdrawal. But this is a superficial unity. For the Sadrists, a Sunni is above all an infidel (*kafir*)". Crisis Group interview, prominent Shiite personality, Baghdad, November 2005.

¹⁷¹ "We don't need orders to do this because we have a very clear *fatwa* on this matter: 'it is permissible to kill *al-nawasib*, those who hate the Twelver Shiite Imams'. Besides, we always interrogate suspects and execute them only upon determining they really are the killers or the kidnappers". Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* commander, Baghdad, March 2006. Other commanders made the same point: "We don't need to ask Muqtada because there is a very clear *fatwa* that authorises the execution of *nawasib*. All we need to do is read Muhammad

A *Jaysh al-Mahdi* member told Crisis Group that he had killed over 600 people; from his description, it was hard to make out the difference between those he considered legitimate targets and the Sunni Arab population at large.¹⁷² By many accounts, assassination campaigns are carried out in a highly decentralised, undisciplined manner,¹⁷³ and Sadrists have taken to extracting forced confessions under torture.¹⁷⁴ Sadrists express frustration at their inability to wage large-scale raids against Sunni neighbourhoods that, they claim, “are protected by the Americans”.¹⁷⁵ Conversely, the predominantly Sunni insurgency no longer extends Sadrists any special treatment; once described as nationalists and “good Shiites” by the principal armed groups,¹⁷⁶ they have become priority targets for *al-Jaysh al-Islami*, *Jaysh Ansar al-Sunna* and *Tandhim al-Qaeda*. Tellingly, Sadr City, long spared by the insurgency, now endures a growing number of violent and bloody attacks.

Sectarian violence appears to be reaching a new, horrific level in recent days, beginning with the events of 9 July in the West Baghdad Sunni neighbourhood of Jihad, where Shiite gunmen reportedly set up checkpoints, checked identification and then dragged Sunnis from their cars and shot them. While numbers varied considerably, most accounts indicated dozens of fatalities. In what were generally seen as Sunni revenge attacks, a bomb exploded hours later near a Shiite mosque, killing at least nineteen and wounding 59, and the next day bombs exploded in Sadr City, reportedly killing a further ten and injuring more than 40.¹⁷⁷

Sadrists spokespersons denied involvement in the events of 9 July, and Muqtada himself called for calm and requested the parliament meet in emergency session to

discuss the crisis and “prevent a sea of blood”.¹⁷⁸ The danger of a major escalation, however, requires that he go beyond words if he is to prove his fitness for a constructive role in today’s violent and volatile Iraq.

Sadiq al-Sadr’s chapter on jihad”. Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* commander, Baghdad, March 2006.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interview, *Jaysh al-Mahdi* commander, Baghdad, March 2006.

¹⁷³ A Badr Brigade member stressed this key difference from his own organisation. “Both Badr and *Jaysh al-Mahdi* are executing Baathists and *takfiriyyin*, but there is a difference between the two. Badr is a military organisation, with professional methods and structures, and with people specialising in such killings. Badr is more professional than *Jaysh al-Mahdi*”. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, April 2006.

¹⁷⁴ In a speech delivered at Wasit University in which he rejected any comparison between *Jaysh al-Mahdi* and Saddam’s security apparatus, Muqtada nonetheless harshly criticised those of his followers who tortured the *nawasib*.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews with members of *Jaysh al-Mahdi*, Baghdad, April and May 2006.

¹⁷⁶ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°50, *In Their Own Words: Reading the Iraq Insurgency*, 15 February 2006, p. 22.

¹⁷⁷ Kurt Semple, “Blast Kills 10 as Violence Flares in Baghdad”, *The New York Times*, 10 July 2006; “New Wave of Attacks Hits Baghdad”, BBC News, 10 July 2006.

¹⁷⁸ Semple, “Blast Kills 10”, op. cit.

V. CONCLUSION

Caught in the vicious cycle of Iraq's perverse dynamics, the Sadrists, government and coalition forces run the risk of adding yet another layer of violence. Although Muqtada has been surprisingly successful in consolidating his position and fine-tuning his movement's strategy, and although he has consistently called for the country's unity, his followers are playing an increasingly central part in its fragmentation. Likewise, in their understandable efforts to curb the use of sectarian-based militias, the Iraqi government and coalition forces threaten to make the Sadrist movement – along with the social base it alone represents – even more unpredictable and violent.

The Sadrists' ability to represent more destitute Shiites is critical. Conservative Shiite circles may dislike them, yet more than once they have demonstrated their ability to represent an important social category, staying power and capacity to withstand coercive means. Seeking to eliminate their militia by force in a context where the state is unable to ensure basic safety would be a particularly high-risk gamble; likewise, there is little chance that economic measures aimed at weakening Muqtada's movement would succeed given the fate of reconstruction efforts so far¹⁷⁹ and given the Sadrists' capacity both to accumulate resources and redistribute them to marginalised sectors of the population. Nor are alternative organisations likely to emerge that can legitimately claim to represent and channel the aspirations of the Sadrist social base: the communist party appeals to a shrinking intellectual elite, while traditional Islamist parties have been discredited by their failure since Saddam's fall to meet basic needs.

By contrast, Muqtada has secured remarkably strong legitimacy in the eyes of his constituency, far stronger in fact than that of many personalities coopted by the coalition. For that reason alone, he deserves recognition as a serious political actor. True, there is little organisational discipline or hierarchical sense among Sadrists, but Muqtada nonetheless has become the authentic spokesman of a significant portion of traditionally disenfranchised Iraqis. To seek to contain, marginalise, let alone eliminate him would do nothing to address the social reality of which his success is the clearest manifestation. The Sadrist movement cannot be reduced to an unruly mob, unduly fired up by a populist leader. It is, rather, a phenomenon with deep roots in contemporary Iraq that expresses a large number of justified grievances. It is important to ensure

that Muqtada helps bring the Sadrists and their social base into the political process; for that, he will have to be treated as a legitimate, representative political actor.

In practical terms, two steps are required to defuse the movement's violent potential. First, a negotiated agreement on Najaf must be found. For Western observers, the question of the Sadrists' presence in the old city may appear trivial; for Muqtada, however, it is central. Although it unquestionably has a social dimension, the Sadrist movement remains deeply inspired by religion. Excluding it from Najaf – the principal Shiite sanctuary, home to Imam Ali's shrine – means consigning it to secondary religious status and branding it a usurper. The issue is not whether Muqtada should be allowed to lead the city's Friday prayer, a bridge too far given his lack of religious credentials. However, at a minimum and in the context of a formal agreement with Muqtada, leading ayatollahs and SCIRI should allow the reopening of Sadr headquarters in Najaf, encourage Sadrists to resume studying at the *Hawza* and even permit select *Jaysh al-Mahdi* members to play a role in policing the city.

Secondly, it is imperative that *Jaysh al-Mahdi* improve its discipline. As explained, it would be counter-productive today for the coalition or Iraqi government to try to destroy it, arrest its members, or seize its weapons. Far more realistic, and far more urgent, is to strictly circumscribe its area of operations. *Jaysh al-Mahdi* could, for instance, be given a formal, agreed-upon role in protecting civilians in places where the government cannot. But the Sadrists must cease indiscriminate attacks, whether retaliatory or pre-emptive, against presumed Baathists and Wahhabis.

This is Muqtada's principal challenge, made all the more imperative by the cold-blooded, highly provocative killings of 9 July for which no responsibility has yet been assigned but for which media suspicion falls on at least some Sadrist elements. Should he fail to take it on, he will be partly responsible for two things he ardently claims he wishes to avoid: Iraq's fragmentation and civil war within Islam (*fitna*). By establishing the Mahdist institute as a means of educating his militants, and by seeking to regulate his movement's and militia's activities, Muqtada has taken initial, welcome but insufficient steps. True disciplinary action against those guilty of transgression, not mere rhetoric, is required; to that end Muqtada must understand that the *fattan* – those who cause *fitna*, or internal discord – do not all belong to the other camp and that not all who belong to his camp can be forgiven. For Muqtada, who fashions himself a truly national figure, this is the ultimate test of leadership.

Amman/Brussels, 11 July 2006

¹⁷⁹ Immediately after the 2004 showdown, the U.S. launched an ambitious reconstruction program in Sadr City, as a way of driving a wedge between Muqtada and his followers. As has been the case in other parts of the country, this effort was short-lived and failed to produce any tangible effect.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF IRAQ



APPENDIX B

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SENIOR ADVISERS

Crisis Group's Senior Advisers are former Board Members (not presently holding executive office) who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on from time to time.

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As at July 2006